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*The Community Training and Assistance Center is a national not-for-profit organization with a demonstrated record of success in the fields of education and community development. CTAC builds district, state, and community capacity by providing technical assistance, conducting research and evaluation, and informing public policy. It focuses on developing leadership, planning and managerial expertise within school systems, community-based organizations, collaborative partnerships, state and municipal governments, and health and human service agencies. Since 1979, CTAC has provided assistance to hundreds of community-based organizations, coalitions and public institutions in the United States and several other countries.*

*CTAC's staff is comprised of nationally recognized executives, educators, policy makers, researchers and organizers who have extensive experience working with city, county and state agencies, educational institutions, federal legislative bodies, not-for-profit organizations, philanthropic institutions and the private sector.*

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### *Credits*

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# Overview

## The Value of School Improvement Planning

School improvement planning, duly constituted school site councils, and shared decision making have evolved from accepted leadership practices into mandates, not only from districts but also from state and federal agencies. As mandates increase, school plans may become formulaic and compliance-driven in actual practice, or as some have observed, a set of hoops to jump through in order to receive funds, rather than the driving force for school improvement. Also and unfortunately, planning mandates have not always resulted in improved student achievement.

After more than a decade of implementation, the No Child Left Behind Act has brought to light the scope and character of underachievement in many schools. Yet the requirements for turning schools around have not caused dramatic change. ESEA Flexibility Waivers have brought renewed attention to low performing “priority” and “focus” schools, calling on states to enact meaningful interventions aligned with “turnaround principles.”<sup>1</sup> This raises the question: What works in these schools?

The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC), a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to developing leadership, planning, and managerial expertise within school systems and other organizations, believes strongly that quality school improvement planning and implementation is critical to increasing student achievement, and overall school excellence. Successful school plans—ones that get results—are the responsibility of the district as well as each school, but planning requires greater leadership skill and more time than is currently available in most schools.

Over the last two decades, through its school improvement work with many school districts, CTAC developed the Standard Bearer Schools improvement model, which builds understanding of how and why planning matters and adds value through the strategic use of achievement data, stakeholder perceptions, and critical decision making. The outcomes from this process suggest that while there may be no single, magic solution to turning around schools, there is a blueprint for the difficult work and thoughtful analysis that accompany dramatic improvement. Signs of this improvement should become visible within the first year, and should be sustainable by the third year.

## The Value Added by Standard Bearer Schools Tools and Processes

Participants working with the Standard Bearer Schools model value “working smarter,” making the time that is already spent in planning count for better decisions and ultimately higher achievement for all students. In addition, Standard Bearer Schools promote stakeholder involvement, which increases the number of shareholders involved in school improvement and builds bridges within the school community. The fundamental goals that ground the practices of Standard Bearer Schools are comprised of the following:

*Improving academic achievement for all students.* Eliminating the achievement gap and fulfilling the potential of young people are key goals of school improvement planning. Until these goals are fully realized, schools will be in an ongoing improvement mode. A continuously improving school increases the capacity not only of students but of teachers, administrators, and parents to improve achievement. The creator of the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement in industry

contends that continuous improvement of every process, element, and function of an organization not only impacts the quality of results, but the character and quality of the organization.<sup>2</sup> An organization can always improve. “Equity and excellence for all” can be a slogan or it can be a way of life in a school. Participants in Standard Bearer Schools learn to impact student learning through ongoing scrutiny of a range of data about the school and its students.

*Bringing formal critical thinking to school improvement.* Schools are busy places where everyday routines consume most of the available time. Improvement planning allows the school community to take time out and look in a formal way at the effectiveness of the school and the achievement of its students. Participants in Standard Bearer Schools use an array of student data and other evidence together with creative and critical thinking strategies in order to identify issues and priorities for improvement. These tools promote careful analysis of both achievement and perceptual data as a means of identifying root causes of underachievement in the school. Some of the problems and issues facing school leaders and planners are not amenable to easy or quick fixes. For the same reasons that teachers formalize the teaching of critical or rational thought processes to students, school planning teams require formal inquiry processes in order to address some of the thorniest issues of learning. Piecemeal improvement, which characterizes many compliance-based planning processes and is often so unsatisfactory, becomes an anathema to schools that engage in Standard Bearer Schools.

*Involving students, parents\*, and the community in improving learning.* It is a legal mandate to select student and parent representation to the school council in most states, as well as in schools receiving federal funds. Those in Standard Bearer Schools welcome the voices of students, parents, and other community members whose thoughts and opinions provide powerful explanatory data about learning in the school. Students and parents, in particular, see the school from different perspectives and through different lenses. Creating additional and consistent avenues for extended stakeholder input, such as conducting an annual organizational assessment, is a critical feature of Standard Bearer Schools. Greater participation in school improvement decisions leads to greater accountability for, and shared commitment to, the community’s youth.

The core of planning in the Standard Bearer Schools model is grounded in a Ten-Step Process that guides school planning teams through the review of a range of data available in schools with an emphasis on root cause analysis. Participants systematically gather evidence and develop action plans to treat the causes rather than the symptoms of underachievement.

## **Purpose and Use of the *Guide for Standard Bearer Schools***

Under Race to the Top (RTTT), many states and districts have improved their student assessment and accountability systems and are providing better progress reports to educators and parents. Some districts have added professional development for data-informed decisions in schools and classrooms.

However, as noted by a superintendent involved in Standard Bearer Schools, “Data mean nothing without a planned response to them.” Standard Bearer Schools Tools and Processes help participants take the next steps to a planned response through the use of multiple sources and types of data,

*Data mean nothing without a  
planned response to them.*

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\* Throughout the guide, CTAC uses the word “parent” for ease in reading. Note that strategies to involve parents should reflect the many other guardians and caretakers involved in the lives of the school’s children.

including organizational assessments, and the application of formal critical thinking to root cause analysis and decision making.

This guide, which explains the tools and processes, is intended for use by planning teams in participating schools. It is both a road map to guide improvement planning and a companion document to professional development activities. The Standard Bearer Schools Tools and Processes are based on several assumptions that CTAC holds about data-informed decision making in the schools:

*School planning teams should address the root causes of underachievement, not merely the symptoms, and in order to identify root causes, teams will need to formalize their thinking processes.* To facilitate thinking and problem solving, participants in Standard Bearer Schools draw from a toolbox of widely used methods for root cause analysis. These include strategies drawn from several sources that are used by business and industry to look for root causes of variation or deviation in outputs. A few examples of strategies that Standard Bearer Schools' participants have found helpful are included in this guide.

*The district is a partner with each of its schools in the planning process.* Among the roles of the district is one of providing schools with a clear vision of teaching and learning expectations and with achievement data in a timely manner and in a format accessible to all stakeholders. Many districts have moved forward in the arena of data collection and display and are providing schools with an annual data package and/or web access to data. Given the improving technologies and the drive in states to provide unique student identifiers, student information systems may become friendlier to users in the future. In the meantime, CTAC works with district departments to refine the accessibility of data displays.

*Good decisions are based on multiple measures of achievement and a variety of types of data.* Besides large-scale assessments, such as summative state assessments or those developed by multi-state consortia, schools should have formative assessment data—data that are collected at several points during the year to measure student progress and that can be used for mid-course corrections. Also, different types of data—qualitative as well as quantitative—increase the potential for high quality analyses and better understanding. The Standard Bearer Schools model employs the Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS) to collect and analyze the perceptions of students, parents, teachers, and administrators regarding a range of elements related to effective schools.

There are three sections to the guide: (1) a description of the data analysis tools developed by CTAC for use in the planning process; (2) an explanation of the Ten-Step Process practiced by Standard Bearer Schools; and, (3) a brief compendium of support materials, such as roles and responsibilities, parent involvement, professional development, and a glossary, included to assist the range of persons who may need to refer to this guide, including school and district administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members.

## Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education (2012). *ESEA Flexibility review guidance*. [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)
- 2 A discussion of Deming's principles as they relate to schools can be found in: Warwick, R. (1995). *Beyond piecemeal improvements: How to transform your school using Deming's quality principles*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

# SECTION I

## Data Analysis Tools for Standard Bearer Schools

The planning process used by Standard Bearer Schools relies on several tools that participants learn to use effectively and come to appreciate: Comprehensive Data Analysis; the Organizational Assessment Survey; the School Profile; and Root Cause Analysis.

### **Comprehensive Data Analysis (CDA)**

The results of end-of-year, state-administered assessments have historically become available late in the spring or during the summer. Thus, for most school principals and teachers who end one school year and start a new one during these months, the time to begin the serious review of the previous year's results with the faculty and community is late August or early September. Data reports on state and district websites frequently are not displayed in an accessible manner and require a principal or someone else in the school to reshape them at a very busy time. In a number of districts there will be a user-friendly student achievement data package, purchased or developed by the district, ready for each school before the school year begins.

As many states transition to new assessment systems intended to provide more timely and actionable student data, these packages are presented as interactive dashboards, allowing for customized use of achievement and

other student data. Still, training and expertise vary greatly among schools in their ability to make use of these data and to integrate them with locally-collected measures.

Addressing school planning through the Ten-Step Process is based on the assumption that school planning teams are provided with this full package of achievement data early in the school year. If there is not district support for data reports to the schools, then the principal or a designated person in the school should have high quality training and the software required to produce reports or profiles. CTAC provides technical support to districts that are working on improving their data services to schools.

The CDA package recommended by CTAC includes, in graphic representation: major standardized assessment(s), in the aggregate by grade level and disaggregated by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, English language fluency, and disabilities—but also any other areas that schools and districts know to be litmus tests of effectiveness. It is desirable (for greater statistical credibility) to have standardized achievement test data (e.g., ITBS, CAT, SAT10) as well as standards-based performance assessment data (i.e., state-mandated assessments) for each student. These data also should be compared within the district and state context so that a school can see, for example, how its tenth graders performed compared to other tenth graders in the district and state. It is also helpful to see the new data compared to at least the two prior years' data, so that achievement trends can be identified and monitored. A good CDA package from the district also will include all benchmark or formative assessments from the previous year and data from other *consistently administered* assessments, such as the SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement summaries that usually also become available in this window. Multiple measures increase the accuracy of data analyses, but classroom assessments that are not consistently administered (same date, amount of time, and test conditions) should be used cautiously in analysis. CTAC provides guidance regarding use of quality teacher-developed and/or performance-based assessments.

Where unique student and teacher identifiers are available in the data system, the CDA package can and should include comparisons of individual student growth over time and may include teacher performance. Measurements of individual student growth render a clearer picture of the school's role in achievement by diminishing the mobility variable.

Examples of several CDA graphs and charts are provided in Section II where the planning process is explained.

### **Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS)**

Educators, parents, and children know that the conditions at their schools affect how much learning takes place. Educational research also shows that school and classroom conditions are powerful players in achievement, and they are the conditions over which the school has the most control and capacity to change—as opposed to home conditions, for example.<sup>1</sup> Organizational assessment is a means for identifying and addressing conditions at each school in the district. Starting with a targeted, confidential survey of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members, a picture of the conditions of the school in seven areas known to impact school quality is developed.

The OAS, as developed by CTAC, allows participants and school districts in Standard Bearer Schools to identify a school's core conditions, as seen through the eyes of its constituents, and provide input to these analyses of the causes of underperformance. The seven areas assessed by the OAS are:

- School Context and Readiness
- Leadership and Improvement Planning
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Teacher Effectiveness and Evaluation
- Student Responsibility and Support
- Family and School Relationships
- District Systems of Support

Items in the OAS are based on effective organizations in education, community development, and the private sector.

Survey results can be analyzed by school planning teams and faculties to address perceptions about the effectiveness of the school. As planning teams are seeking to identify root causes, the OAS data provide clues to places to look. An annual collection of these data, usually in the spring, also provides the school with (1) a means of increasing the amount and impact of stakeholder involvement; and (2) a way to document improvements in the perceptions of stakeholders about the effectiveness of the school as planners address areas of concern.

A strength of the OAS is that it is school-based—both the survey respondents and the data collection or administration of the survey. With a school-based effort, participation increases and schools feel more confidence in the quality of the information collected. An important spring or end-of-school-year activity in Standard Bearer Schools is that of distributing and collecting the survey forms at the school level. Surveys are often not returned unless respondents understand the purpose of the survey, the importance of their responses, and receive feedback about the findings. Teachers and administrators as well as other school staff are usually convinced of the survey's usefulness after the first administration and return of results, but it is important to find the best mode within the school to distribute and collect the forms.

Students are best reached in classes where teachers provide time and directions on completing the survey. Parent distribution should be based on the strategies that are the most successful to reach a diversity of parents in the school community. For many schools, parents are randomly selected, with a principal letter explaining the purpose and importance of the survey to school improvement and giving instructions for returning the survey. If selecting parents randomly, it is important to ensure that all of those selected return the survey. While schools should aim for 100% response of staff, the large numbers of students and parents mean that a lower percentage return may constitute a reliable sample. The district evaluation and research department can help a school set targets for these groups based on the size of the school and parent population, guidelines for which are provided by CTAC. Typically, CTAC aims for a minimum of 30% participation.

In the Ten-Step Process, explained in the next section, data from the organizational assessment are used as the major qualitative tool for probing behind the student achievement data for possible explanations and ultimately root causes. Organizational assessment data ground school improvement efforts in the realities of each school. With this foundation, schools have the knowledge and constituency to improve the conditions of the school that impact student learning.

## **The School Profile**

When the CDA, the OAS results, and the school and district demographic data are compiled, they form the School Profile in Standard Bearer Schools. Schools and districts are involved in deciding what other data (e.g., mobility data) may be included in this package that will be used by school planning teams. Clearly, the objective is to provide the planning team with an adequate and full picture without compromising student confidentiality.

## **Root Cause Analysis (RCA)**

How do planners get from data collection and examination to root cause? In the context of school improvement, causation is a term not used in the way a physicist might use it. Cause here refers to the same meaning that each of us use in our daily lives to solve ordinary problems—the kitchen sink backed up, the air conditioner is not cooling, the car won't start—why? It matters that the plumber can determine whether there is a tea towel in the household drain or a tree root in the exterior plumbing. Trial and error may eventually find causes of problems like these, but student performance is more abstract, with many more variables to probe and, of course, trial and error is rarely a desirable strategy to use on students.

What strategies are useful in probing for root cause? Other organizations facing performance issues and the need to solve performance problems with rational and creative processes often turn to the continuous improvement or Total Quality Management (TQM) tools. Several TQM tools that are useful to school planners include: the 5 Why's and the Cause-and-Effect or Fishbone Diagram. In situations where there is emotional content to discuss, Edward DeBono's "Six Thinking Hats" may be the best initial strategy. There is a large bank of methods that organizations use in their improvement processes.<sup>2</sup>

Participants in Standard Bearer Schools learn to select from a range of proven strategies in order to probe for root cause. The ones included here as examples are some that CTAC technical assistance providers and other school planning teams have found helpful in working through the issue of causation. These methods are briefly explained here and demonstrated in greater detail in the narrative of the Ten-Step Process.

### *Example: Five Why's*

The Five Why's typically refer to the practice of asking, five times, why failure has occurred in order to get to the root cause of the problem. No special technique is required except for open discourse and the willingness to research, if necessary. There can be more than one cause to a problem as well. An example of the Five Why's can be found in Figure 1 (see next page) and in Step Five of the Ten-Step Process.

### *Example: Cause-and-Effect or Fishbone Diagram*

The cause-and-effect or fishbone diagram was developed by Kaoru Ishikawa, the father of quality management processes in the Kawasaki shipyards. The cause-and-effect diagram is used to explore all the potential or real causes (or inputs) that result in a single effect (or output). Causes are arranged according to their level of importance or detail, resulting in a depiction of relationships and hierarchy of events.

Fig. 1

**Five Why's**

Problem or Effect:	The Washington Monument was disintegrating.
Why?	Use of harsh chemicals.
Why are the chemicals used?	To clean pigeon droppings.
Why so many pigeons?	They eat spiders, and there are a lot of spiders at the monument.
Why so many spiders?	They eat gnats, and there are lots of gnats at the monument.
Why so many gnats?	They are attracted to the light at dusk.
Solution:	Turn on the lights at a later time.

Had the problem-solving team stopped at the first "why," they might have sought milder chemicals with which to clean the monument, but the root cause of the problem would have persisted.

Causes listed in a cause-and-effect or fishbone diagram are frequently arranged into four major categories. While these categories can be anything, in schools, some categories may be:

- teacher and other staff (qualifications, experience, effectiveness, professional and collegial development);
- student characteristics (age, gender, reading level, family income, ethnicity, language acquisition);
- curriculum, teaching practices or methods, teaching materials (appropriateness, consistent use of, alignment, adequacy);
- school schedule (length of day, length of periods, after-school times, student activities).

The categories provided here are meant to be helpful, but should not be used to limit the diagram, or used if they are not suggested by the examination of data. The categories that the planning team uses should evolve from the data and/or be revised if the analysis stalls.

The cause-and-effect diagram also is known as the fishbone diagram because it is drawn to resemble the skeleton of a fish, with the main causal categories drawn as "bones" attached to the spine of the fish. The effect or output or problem that is being examined should be written at the end of the arrow. An example of a fishbone is included in Step Five of the Ten-Step Process, Figure 13.

To build a cause-and-effect diagram:

- Be sure everyone agrees on the effect or problem statement before beginning. Be succinct, placing the effect at the end of the arrow or the head of the fish.
- For each of the "bones," think what could be its causes. Add them to the diagram.
- Pursue each line of causality back to its root cause.
- Consider which root causes are most likely to merit further investigation.

## Endnotes

- 1 Hattie, J. (1999). *Influences on student learning*. Inaugural Lecture, University of Auckland.  
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<http://mccluelearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Cumulative-and-Residual-Effects-of-Teachers.pdf>
- 2 Go to [www.isixsigma.com](http://www.isixsigma.com) and click on Tools and Templates on the menu.

# SECTION III

## An Explanation of the Ten-Step Process

The Comprehensive Data Analysis and the Organizational Assessment Survey results, which are used to create the School Profile and the Root Cause Analysis, are the critical tools designed by CTAC for use in the Ten-Step Process.

When school data are available, the team is selected, and the meeting is scheduled, it is time to begin the Ten-Step Process. The steps, explained in greater detail in this section of the guide, are summarized with descriptors in Figure 2. The descriptors attending each step identify typical actions that take place during that step. They are not intended for use as a checklist but rather as a heuristic or prompt to assist the planning team in being thorough. The column on the right is provided to develop a timeline for the year. Some dates may define the beginning and end of the planning timeline, for instance: (1) the date when annual assessment data are available in usable formats; and, (2) the date when the school plan is due to be completed, which is usually established by the district.

Standard Bearer Schools is *recursive* so that the planning team may return to an earlier step for clarification, focus, or re-direction. It is the recursive nature of school planning and implementation that allows schools to “get it right,” to make mid-course corrections as needed. Still another aspect of school planning is that the school team is implementing one plan while creating a new

Fig. 2

**Standard Bearer Schools Ten-Step Process and Descriptors**

STEP	DATE
<b>Step One: Establish norms and set purpose.</b>	
Develop working norms for the group. Include considerations to build group trust and prepare to share findings with the wider school community.	
Revisit Common Core, state, or industry standards as the primary benchmark for student learning.	
Revise, as needed, the alignment among standards, materials, teaching practices, and assessments.	
Develop a statement of purpose based on increasing student learning.	
<b>Step Two: Analyze perceptual data from stakeholders.</b>	
Consider the population of the school and community.	
Examine their perceptions about the school using the Organizational Assessment Survey and other sources.	
Develop objective statements about what the data show.	
<b>Step Three: Analyze student data coinciding with conditions shown in the OAS.</b>	
Disaggregate the annual achievement data by income, ethnicity, program, gender, grade level, language, teacher, and other demographic or program categories that may help explain achievement outcomes.	
Look for patterns in data at the school, grade, and student level. Look at the clusters or subtopics in the assessment for greater specificity.	
Look at other assessments of the same students for parallel findings.	
Look at other data, including but not limited to perceptual data, behavioral data, school program, and process data.	
Use tests of statistical significance to determine if differences matter.*	
<b>Step Four: Identify critical issues in the data.</b>	
Through an analysis of the data, select those areas where significant groups of students are achieving below standard and/or that show student achievement is flat or has declined over time.	
Record issues that emerge from observable patterns in the data.	
Look for similar trends in multiple years of data.	
Compare averages with state, district and demographically similar schools.	
Identify areas of growth and/or strength in student achievement patterns.	
Examine relationships among or between critical issues and events (e.g., mathematics scores are down; Common Core standards adopted during the previous year).	
<b>Step Five: Probe for causation.</b>	
Continue to ask questions about observable patterns in the data and about the character of the data with regard to the critical issues identified.	
Develop hypotheses about the possible reasons for the observed patterns and trends.	
Use perceptual, program, and teacher data to test hypotheses and to probe for possible causes.	
Collect additional data and input if needed (e.g., conducting interviews or focus groups with students, parents, and/or teachers on a topic).	

*continued on next page*

\*Caution should be exercised, however, when making decisions based on small numbers of students.

Fig. 2

**Standard Bearer Schools Ten-Step Process and Descriptors** (continued)

STEP	DATE
<b>Step Six: Determine priorities for improvement.</b>	
Determine what the school <i>can change</i> (programs, processes, professional knowledge and skills); what it <i>may influence</i> (behavior, parent involvement, communication); and where it <i>may need to intervene</i> (pre-school, tutorials, parent visits, etc.).	
Select a manageable number of priorities as the focus of school improvement. The priorities should be grounded in the root causes of the critical issues identified in Steps Four and Five.	
<b>Step Seven: Develop strategies.</b>	
Search for potential strategies to address the priority improvement areas.	
Use educational research findings or best practices as a decision-making tool when selecting and developing strategies.	
Plan strategies to address the priority improvement areas.	
Determine when professional development is the strategy itself and when it is a support for the implementation of another strategy.	
Consider conducting small action research projects to test out strategies before deciding on full implementation.	
Consider how the planning team will know that a strategy is producing the desired result.	
<b>Step Eight: Review and revise the school plan.</b>	
Communicate with stakeholders about the planning process and opportunities for input.	
Evaluate the progress on previous improvement plan activities.	
Consider how the new priorities fit into the current plan.	
Ascertain that the budget will support the improvement priorities.	
Draft a proposal for the revision of the school plan that includes the rationale for any change and the impact on resources (staff and funds).	
Include a description of the rationale for implementing a new strategy, the expected results, and the planned evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy.	
<b>Step Nine: Share decisions and revise again as needed.</b>	
Share the key elements and actions of the draft plan and solicit input from representatives of all stakeholders.	
Determine staff needs for successful implementation.	
Agree on and record implementation activities, dates, and timelines for completion.	
Revise the proposed plan into final form.	
<b>Step Ten: Implement the new plan.</b>	
Begin the new school term with a review of the plan priorities and strategies.	
Designate plan monitors to help the school stay on task, provide updates, and celebrate milestones.	
Review the new achievement data from the latest state-mandated assessment and begin the process again.	

one. Thus, planning and implementing become overlapping cycles that touch at several points. Accordingly, by Step Eight of the Ten-Step Process, the current year's plan is a prominent player in the new planning cycle for next year's plan. The current year's plan should, however, be in evidence throughout the early stages of the process and be monitored for progress.

*Standard Bearer Schools is recursive so that the planning team may return to an earlier step for clarification, focus, or re-direction.*

### **Key Considerations for Leading School Improvement Teams**

The skill and knowledge of the team leader(s) are important throughout the planning cycle. Before beginning, a good leader considers (1) how best to present the array of school data to team members as well as school and community members; and, (2) how to organize meetings so that they are purposeful and respectful of team member time and expertise. Some data and meeting essentials are included here. This work can be shared by those with different roles in the school and can also be shared with CTAC. Reading this section provides an idea about the key attributes and considerations necessary for the process.

*First, the team leader should know the character of the school's data, as well as its uses, strengths, and limitations, and then consider the best method of presentation to the planning team.* Examining and analyzing data for school improvement does not require expertise in statistics, but the planning team will benefit from some general principles about the data that they are reviewing. For a first look at data, graphical representations are especially beneficial, as patterns and comparisons are more visible and easier to follow than tables of numbers and percentages.

Before deciding to use any type of data, the team leader should determine the reliability of the data for planning. For example, are data based on consistently administered assessments or on regular observations? Databases that are small or incomplete may be misleading or may lead to identification of students whose privacy should be protected. Are the data accurate? Data with errors that must be retracted lead to a distrust of the source, so it is important to check numbers and accuracy prior to distributing data to team members.

Other data analysis essentials for planning teams are listed below; the team leader may want to add other information or clues to understanding the school's databases.

- *Examine several types of data, most of which can be categorized as quantitative or qualitative.* Quantitative data include state assessment results, formative or benchmark assessments, diagnostic data, and interim and end-of-unit tests for each grade level and subject area assessed. Qualitative data are those collected systematically through interviews, surveys, and class observations to determine the effectiveness of the school processes. The OAS, the assessment tool used in Standard Bearer Schools to examine stakeholder perceptions about the conditions of the school, provides qualitative data.
- *Use other available data in order to get a sound grasp of the school's strengths and weaknesses or to look for potential causes of underperformance.* Sources may include: behavioral data (e.g., attendance, disruption, suspension, and expulsion data); observational data from systematically-collected classroom observations of students; participation rates in extracurricular activities or advanced placement classes, for example; and data that show patterns and characteristics of class failure or retention, mobility, credit accumulation, and drop-outs.

- *Review program data if students in special programs are identifiable in the data system and it is possible to disaggregate by program.* Programs include: comprehensive school-wide reform design; a particular reading, writing, or mathematics initiative; a computer-based program; and supplemental after-school programs. Each program or initiative that a school adopts absorbs resources—human and fiscal—and should be assessed for its effectiveness on a regular basis.
- *Examine a variety of achievement data, based on multiple measures of student performance, both summative and formative.* Summative achievement data, usually from the spring state assessment, are always the starting point for the new planning year, but they should be augmented, where possible, by formative assessment data, such as benchmark assessments. Data from teacher and administrator observations or artifact data in the form of student work products also yield important academic achievement information—but only if they are collected in a consistent and rigorous manner.
- *Disaggregate student achievement data by the following demographic factors: income, race/ethnicity, gender and English language fluency.* Other factors that may provide useful information include the length of time the student has attended the school and the teachers who have taught the student. When examining organizational data, disaggregating the data by respondent or role (e.g., teacher, administrator, student, and parent), race/ethnicity, length of tenure in the school, and years in the profession can provide important perspectives on school effectiveness. Looking at assessment data only in the aggregate can be misleading.

*Second, the team leader should frontload the improvement planning meetings for success.* There are many resources in bookstores and online for those who are leading task-oriented groups.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, principals choose to lead the leadership team meetings, but technically, any willing and able member of the team may do so. The following suggestions are intended to promote effective meetings.

- *Establish and revisit norms.* Agreeing to start on time or wait for everyone, as well as agreeing in advance how issues of privacy and candor will be handled can foster trust and open communication, and lay the groundwork for investing the wider school community in the eventual priorities.
- *Form a work group that is identified by name* (e.g., leadership team, school council, planning committee) and particularly, that is representative of all stakeholders: administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members. Everyone in the school community should know and recognize planning team members.
- *Establish regular meetings and work sessions on the school calendar for the full year.* Discuss the calendar at the first meeting so that any major conflicts can be ironed out. Meetings should coordinate with the Ten-Step Process timeline to complete the steps of the planning process.
- *Set a meeting time that accommodates the greatest number of team members.* After-school meetings are good for teacher and student members but often difficult for parent and community members. Some schools find that team members are willing to alternate between afternoon and evening meetings so that no group is overly inconvenienced. Subcommittees or topic teams can do some of the legwork between meetings. For example, a specially-designated team might do the research on strategies, once the priorities are established. Often persons who cannot participate in leadership group meetings can find time to do some of the needed tasks as adjunct members of the planning team.

- *Arrange the meeting space ahead of time* with chairs, flip charts, etc. so that people are not leaving the meeting for additional chairs or supplies. Arrangements should take into consideration basic comforts, such as nearby lighted parking lots, restrooms, refreshments, and food for longer meetings.
- *Prepare an agenda for each meeting that identifies the desired goal and provides backup material.* Meetings should not go beyond two hours unless special plans have been made (as with a retreat, etc.). Expect that the process will take 12–15 two-hour meetings for the team, though this may vary widely depending on the local context.
- *Maintain an open process:* publish meeting times, agendas, brief summaries of accomplishments in meetings; and invite other teachers and parents to join in, whenever possible. As a norm, consider beginning each session with an informal discussion of progress to date.

### Using the Ten-Step Process in Planning Meetings

The following discussion of the Ten Steps listed in Figure 2, provides an explanation of (1) why each step is important, and (2) how to take the step—a brief example of what the step might look like in practice with the use of some of the data analysis tools. Additionally, tips for success and a summary are included with each step. Some steps will be familiar to school personnel; others may require some explanation, processing, and time or possibly even a different perspective on school planning. Persons new to Standard Bearer Schools and the Ten-Step Process frequently underestimate the complexity of Steps Two–Six. For this reason, small slices of composite school data are included in these steps, with narratives of how a planning team analyzed these data. The examples show how other planning teams have progressed through the steps—but their processes are neither the only way, nor necessarily the best way for every school.

Because the process is recursive, it is always possible to revisit a step at any time. Developing a willingness to review, rethink, and self-correct is a sign of strength in a planning team. All steps require that the team leader(s) prepare materials and plan group processing strategies prior to the group session. Inadequate preparation may mean lost time, but more importantly, it may prevent some members of the team from participating fully.

*Developing a willingness to review, rethink, and self-correct is a sign of strength in a planning team.*

### Step One: Establish norms and set purpose.

- Develop working norms for the group. Include considerations to build group trust and prepare to share findings with the wider school community.
- Revisit Common Core, state, or industry standards as the primary benchmark for student learning.
- Revise, as needed, the alignment among standards, materials, teaching practices, and assessments.
- Develop a statement of purpose based on increasing student learning.

### *Why is this step important?*

There are many important parts to Step One, all of which involve an orientation to the work that lies ahead. This step answers the questions: Who are we as a group? What are we here to do?

The first question is addressed by the setting of norms.<sup>2</sup> The experience of facilitators across fields indicates that establishing norms yields benefits in trust and full participation.<sup>3</sup> In establishing the rules and expectations for group interaction, important discussions take place in which participants will often share uncertainties about this process such as retribution for critical statements or additional work seen as unneeded. These or other fears can often be eased by the tone of the group. Many participants have likely participated in school improvement in the past, with little to show for it. Acknowledging that skepticism can enable facilitators to craft meetings that are responsive to the team members. Ultimately, however, trust is gained with results.

The answer to the second question seems obvious: We are here to make sure students learn. However, it is important that all participants, including those without a background in education, are familiar with how we measure learning. While the details of unpacking, aligning, implementing, and revising state and local student learning standards are certainly the purview of grade-level and subject-area teacher teams within the school, the planning team will benefit from an overall view of the standards as they grapple with the achievement picture that is emerging from the data.

A standard can appear deceptively simple but involve a large, complex set of knowledge and skills on the part of the student, so the planning team may want to consider what is actually being expected of students. What does a high quality outcome look like at different grade levels? How is the standard assessed? What do different performance levels mean? What are the differences between a below-standard performance and one that meets or exceeds the standards? What do learning gaps mean for students in subsequent years? Understanding the gist of the subject standards leads to a greater appreciation and recognition of the importance of the work that students do in school and inspires a greater commitment to helping all students achieve the standards through the planning process.

### *How do we take Step One—establishing norms and setting purpose?*

To establish norms, a leader should share with the group some typical considerations — electronic distractions, meeting attendance, diversity of voice, and privacy among them. Preparing to offer plausible scenarios in which a different norm may serve the group can challenge thinking and clarify expectations for the work to come. End the initial setting of norms by recommending that the list be revisited each meeting until participants become more familiar with the process.

Next, introduce the concept of standards. While the team leader may want to make complete copies of the standards available, a team meeting is not the place to plod through all of the standards. Instead, it is best to select one or two important standards in reading and mathematics to show how they are organized and assessed, and to provide some key terms and acronyms (e.g., standards, expectations, performance levels) for non-educator team members. Next, participants can engage in an information exchange about the importance and meaning of the standard, what it might look like at different grade levels and how it is assessed locally, as well as on the state test. The goal is to provide a basis for the ongoing work of the team. Figure 3 shows a standard for Grade 5 from the Common Core State Standards. Students are expected to continue to develop as they move through the grade levels and are presented with increasingly complex texts to read.

Fig. 3

### Reading Standard

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.7

Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

A planning team of diverse stakeholders can readily understand what is involved in this standard by trying it themselves. Using a fiction selection presented by a teacher, the team leader can highlight the concepts listed above and encourage the group to share their thoughts. From footnotes in a David Foster Wallace novel, to friendly monsters softening the text of Maurice Sendak, group members can see this across a range of complexity. All participants can discuss the relevance of this standard in light of interactive text. Next, the team can review examples of how the skill is assessed in Grade 5 from the state manual for parents.

Later, if the examination of the assessment data indicates that a revision or realignment is needed, the principal or team leader will want to delegate that work to the grade-level or subject-area teams, but including the full team in this type of analysis allows everyone to see the ongoing quality control that is involved in standards-based teaching and learning.

#### *What are some tips for success?*

- Step One is an opportunity during the earliest meetings of the year to get organized. The step provides content for an interesting dialogue and lays the groundwork for reviewing the achievement data, which may not be available in an accessible format at the first meeting of the school planning team. Also, starting the team meetings with an engaging discussion among participants increases the likelihood that members will bond and attend regularly.
- Distribute updated norms regularly. This serves both to remind group members of their commitment and to foster the sense that they are in charge of the dynamics of the group.
- Selecting a lead teacher or two to present examples of standards to the group is an effective approach. A teacher will also be able to elaborate on the teaching material and related instructional strategies as well as any complexities. A problem-solving standard, with either algebraic or geometric concepts, usually makes an engaging mathematics example to share with the team.

At this point, it may be an appropriate time to demonstrate that teaching to a standard is *not* teaching to the test, a common misperception, and that effective standards-based teaching is an evolving process.

Step One familiarizes the school planning team with the concept of learning standards, which are the basis of assessment in most states and districts. While standards are second nature to the educators on the team, other members will appreciate knowing what a standard entails and how it guides curriculum, instruction and assessment. It also helps all participants to remember how important it is for all students to be able to achieve the standards.

Step One also helps form the narrative about the school which will be continuously challenged throughout the process.

*Teaching to a standard is not teaching to the test.*

## Step Two: Analyze perceptual data from stakeholders.

- Consider the population of the school and community.
- Examine their perceptions about the school using the Organizational Assessment Survey and other sources.
- Develop objective statements about what the data show.

### *Why is this step important?*

Standard Bearer Schools strives to involve everyone with a stake in the school. Working toward this goal, the Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS), which was developed specifically for Standard Bearer Schools, helps school districts identify a school's core conditions, as seen through the eyes of its constituents. The OAS assesses seven areas: school context and readiness, leadership and improvement planning, curriculum and instruction, teacher effectiveness and evaluation, student responsibility and support, family and school relationships, and district systems of support. This enables comparisons of the perceptions of different groups about the same critical issues for success in the school. Central office personnel can add information to the OAS such as reactions to a key school program.

There is a natural tendency to explain data prior to fully analyzing it in context. Therefore, it is valuable to spend time discussing the type of data produced by the OAS. It is also important to spend time answering a basic question— who, exactly, comprises the school community?

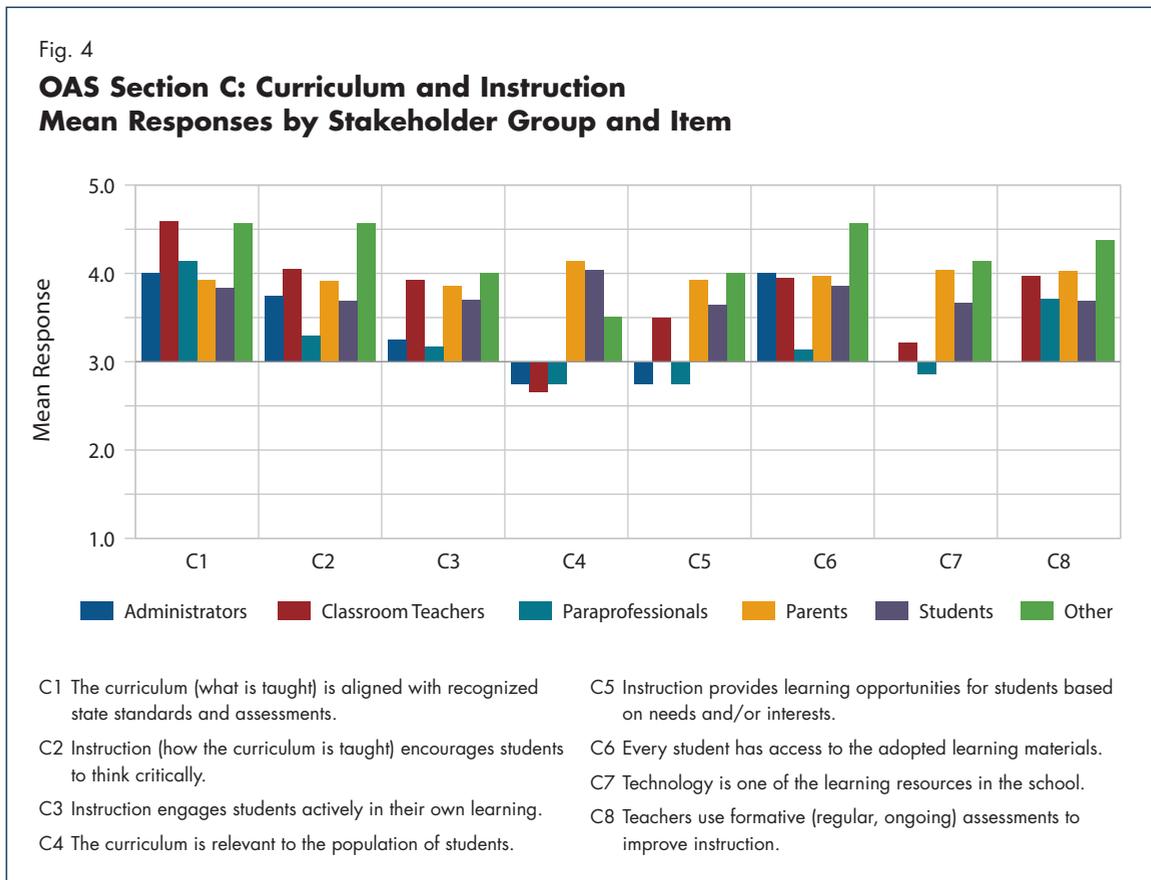
After preparing for these data, the perceptions revealed and the differences noted will provide a basis for understanding the achievement of students. The topics highlighted in the OAS are critical to a school's success, and the team will revisit these topics as they investigate the root causes of the achievement results.

### *How do we take Step Two—analyzing perceptual data?*

First, explain how perceptual data works—that it is not a reflection of reality necessarily, but about how stakeholders perceive the school and each other—and distribute OAS data scrubbed of identifying information. Allow participants the chance to make simple objective statements and draw connections between items on the survey; draw attention to outlying answers to particular items, but explain that the overall responses in a given section may reveal more. This gives team members the chance to get to know the survey items as well as the opportunity to practice analyzing data.

Second, display a few simple graphs showing the population of students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders broken down by race, socioeconomic status, and other demographic information as available. Allow team members to see their school compared to others in the district and state. Often, school teams are surprised at how their school compares to other schools in terms of these demographic characteristics.

Finally, the team is ready to begin analyzing the data. The OAS differs from many other kinds of data the team may be familiar with, and it is valuable to discuss the benefits and limitations of the presentation. Point out that the sample sizes of various groups differ greatly. The team should consider responses from a group of five respondents differently than responses from a group of 250. It is important to not only pay attention to the mean response (see Figure 4), but to the distribution



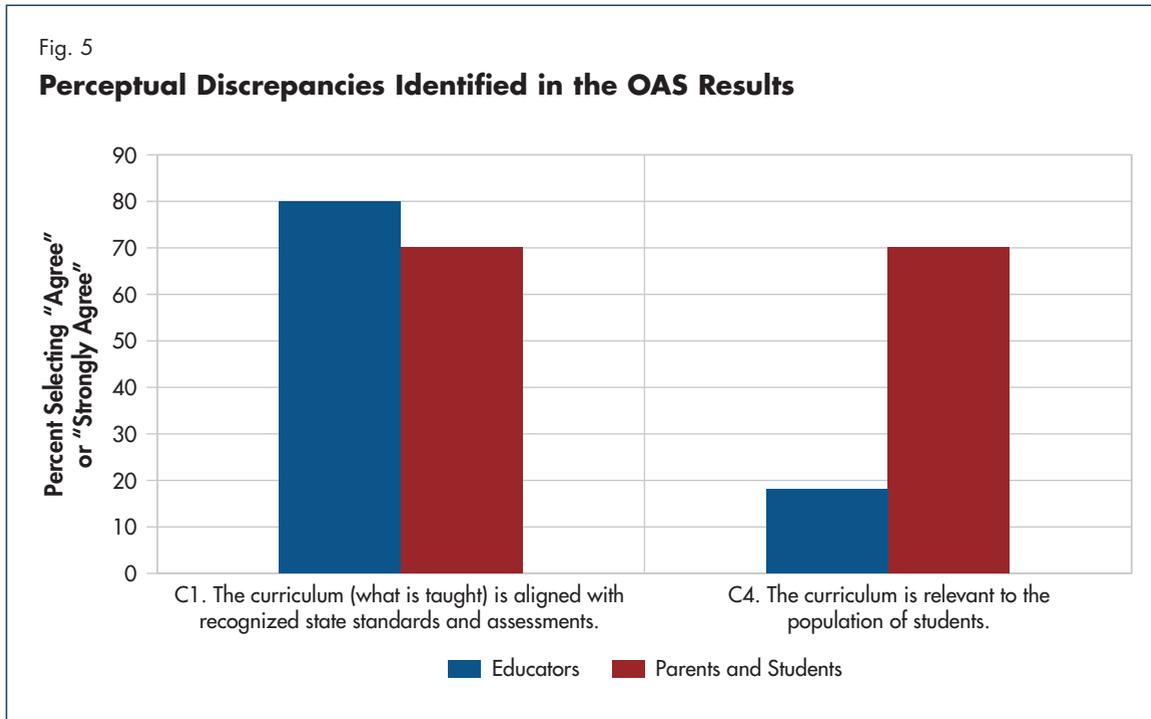
of responses as well. What percentage of the respondents agree or disagree with each statement? For example, an average or mean response of a given group may be 3.0—however, does that represent 50 people strongly agreeing and 50 strongly disagreeing? It may be worthwhile to investigate further.

The team proceeds to analyze the responses section-by-section, making objective observations before trying to explain them (this takes practice). After connections between sections are made and questions have been raised and recorded, the team is ready to move on to Step Three.

Because the examination of data is nuanced and the questions faced by each school are so different, it is easiest to illustrate the process through an example. The following example represents Hillman K-8, a fictional school, located in a mid-sized city in the northeastern U.S.

The planning team at Hillman looked at their school's 2011 Organizational Assessment Survey. They were pleased at the positive feelings of all groups, including parents (see Figure 4). Upon closer inspection, however, they found some answers puzzling. Eighty percent of the staff at the school believe that curriculum, standards and assessments are aligned, among the most positive responses. Yet 82% disagree that the curriculum is relevant to the students, while parents and students say that the curriculum *is* relevant (see Figure 5).

On its own, these data are not enough to take action. But the questions and discussions raised by this incongruence shape the team's examination of student achievement data.



### *What are some tips for success?*

- Practice with fictional OAS data before using the school's own data. It can be difficult to make objective statements about one's own situation, and the distance afforded by simulation may provide a mental template for reacting to the real numbers.
- Prepare reports on the number of respondents who selected the same answer for all questions or did not complete the survey. Prior experiences with improvement processes that were unsuccessful can understandably breed skepticism. Participants may well argue with data, rather than about data, in the early stages. Preparing for a thorough understanding of the data and its limitations can build early trust.
- Check to see how groups respond differently on organizational assessment items. These differences can be seen in the distribution of organizational assessment responses across the groups. Resolving differences in perceptions opens up new ideas and perspectives for planners as well as dialogue among groups of stakeholders. Principals will want to use the results of these organizational assessments in other venues, such as faculty meetings, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings or broader community meetings, for dialogue or to explain how the school is improving perceptions. The more visible the results of the OAS, the easier it becomes to engage the school community in completing and returning the annual survey.
- Acknowledge the differences between perception and reality.

### Step Three: Analyze student data coinciding with conditions shown in the OAS.

- Disaggregate the annual achievement data by income, ethnicity, program, gender, grade level, language, teacher and other demographic or program categories that may help explain achievement outcomes.
- Look for patterns in data at the school, grade, and student level. Look at the clusters or subtopics in the assessment data for greater specificity.
- Look at other assessments of the same students for parallel findings.
- Look at other data, including but not limited to perceptual data, behavioral data, and school program and process data.
- Use tests of statistical significance to determine if differences matter.\*

#### *Why is this step important?*

A quote often attributed to Galileo Galilei reads: “all truths are easy to understand once they are discovered, but the point is to discover them.” Examining and analyzing newly acquired school data and evaluating programs or initiatives are the beginning points of the discovery phase of school planning. Schools and districts may be drowning in data, but collections of data left unanalyzed are relatively useless. It is the examination of the data in order to plan or adjust instruction or make a mid-course correction that is the key to developing plans that get results. When school plans fail to result in meaningful changes in teaching and learning, it may be that strategies and activities are not based on a thorough examination of the data or that the plan is narrowly focused on one type of data, such as the summative (end-of-year) achievement data only.

Beginning the data analysis step assumes that the school planning team has been provided with a full package of achievement data early in the new academic year, such as the CDA tool described in Section I. Data reports provided on state and district websites are not necessarily user-friendly for the purposes of school planning. The graphs in Figures 4, 6, 7 and 8 represent several of the CDA formats created by CTAC to provide planners with information in a more accessible format. The advantage of these formats is that they stimulate analytical thinking through the organization and presentation of the data.

Engaging in careful and thoughtful examination of school, student, and program data will lead to the type of discoveries that can make schools better, and play a significant role in closing achievement gaps. Becoming an inquiry-driven planning team will pay off in both the short- and long-term. Short-term goal attainment is motivational and a great incentive for the planning team.

*A quote often attributed to Galileo Galilei reads: “all truths are easy to understand once they are discovered, but the point is to discover them.”*

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\*Caution should be exercised, however, when making decisions based on small numbers of students.

### *How do we take Step Three—examining and analyzing data and programs?*

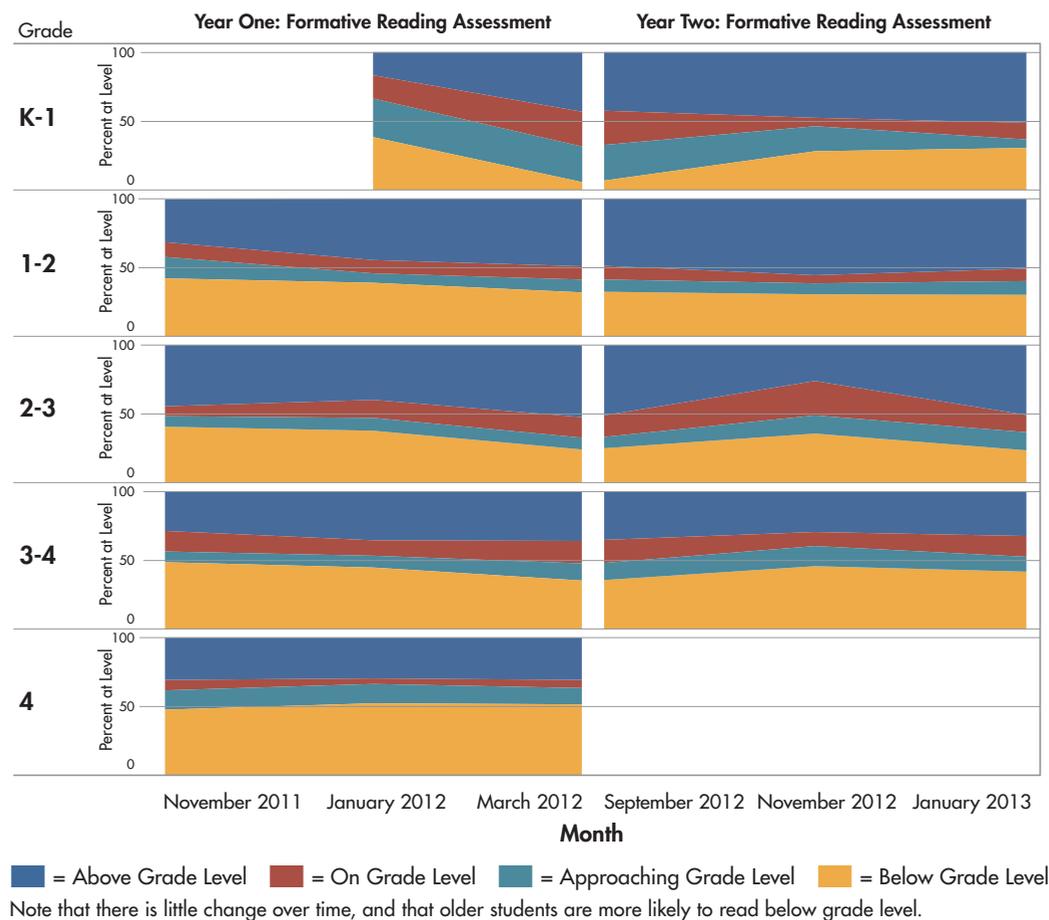
Examining and analyzing data is not so difficult—with the achievement data in hand, just begin brainstorming and listing all of the observable anomalies or puzzling aspects of the data. Next, list questions or comments about what one is seeing. Why are Grade 6 reading comprehension scores lower than last year's scores? How does average performance of the school's students compare to district and state averages? How does average performance of the students in one grade compare to student averages in other grades in the school? Are there commonalities among the students who are performing below standard?

The brainstormed items should next be ranked for a more in-depth look and discussion. One way to rank is by the number of students impacted. Though all observed anomalies are important to pursue eventually, those that impact the greater number of students will be of immediate interest and the most likely to have been school-influenced.

The planning team at Hillman K-8 School looked at their school's 2011 state assessment results and found that 35% of all students in Grades 3-8 were proficient in English/Language Arts (ELA), and 41% were proficient in Mathematics. However, only 29% of the English language learners (ELL) in particular were proficient in ELA, and 38% were proficient in Mathematics. Disaggregating student achievement data by English language fluency, in this case, creates an immediate concern

Fig. 6

#### **Formative Reading Assessments Across Two Years: K-4**



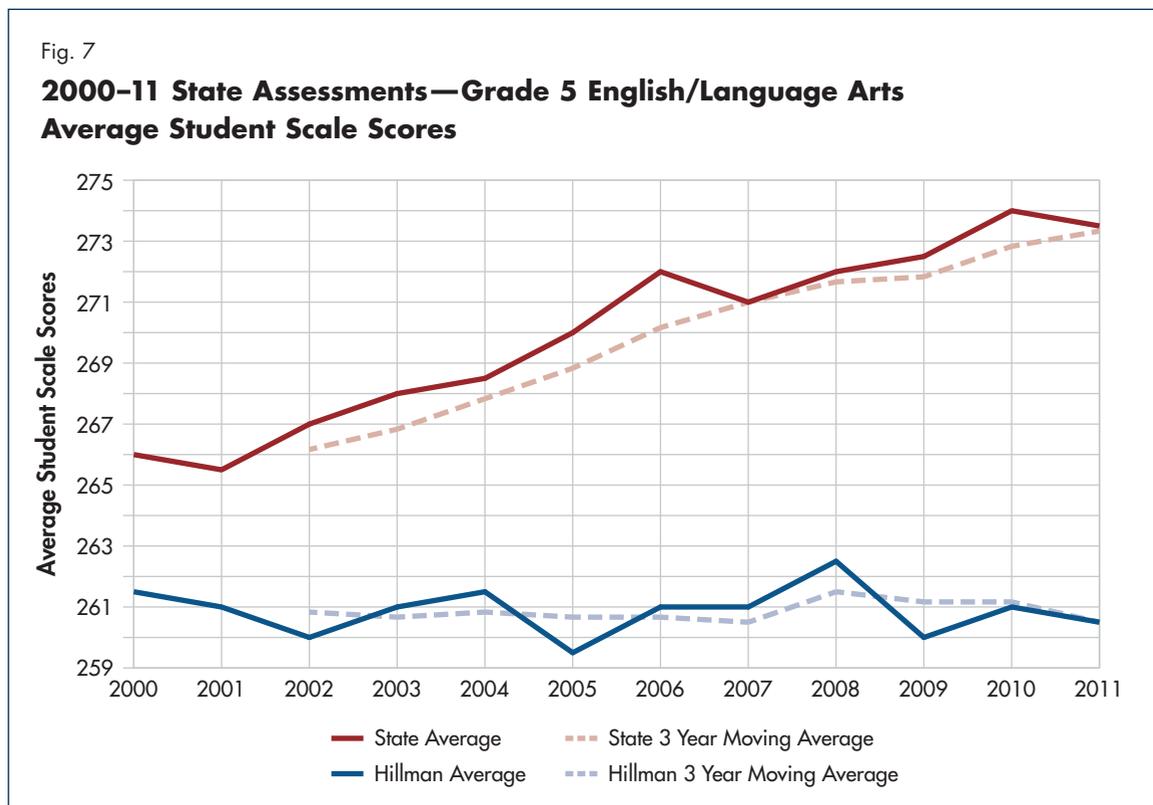
for the team. But, does information from the disaggregated state assessment data provide enough insight into this achievement gap so that the school improvement planning team can move forward to set an objective, develop strategies, and finalize an action plan? No! So what else does this school planning team consider before setting priorities?

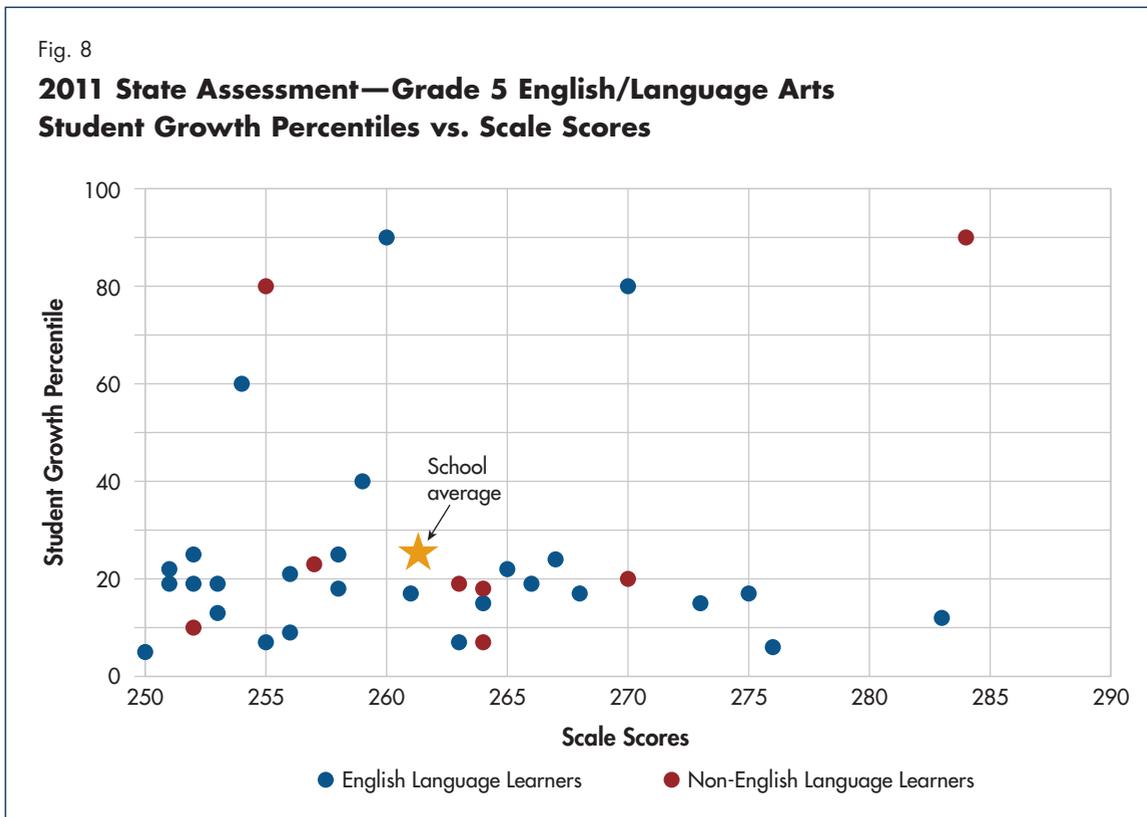
The team examined formative assessment data to further confirm whether the pattern they were seeing was evident elsewhere. They disaggregated data from a district-wide benchmark reading assessment which had previously correlated to the state assessment. Sure enough, the patterns held. The team saw low achievement overall (Figure 6). When the team looked at the same graph for ELL students, they saw the same pattern with slightly lower achievement. The fact that this pattern is also noted in Grades K-2 is an important finding. Even though state assessment scores are often indicative of performance throughout the entire school, members of the team whose students were not reflected in the initial data voiced concern. Using multiple measures of student achievement helped to reinforce the idea that any results students had achieved were everyone's responsibility.

The team also examined the display in Figure 7, which shows that these issues had persisted for many years. This preempted many explanations resulting from demographic changes, staff turnover, and the halcyon days of a prior leader.

While this graph only shows Grade 5, presentations of other grades told the same story. This was further reinforced by examining the growth of the students, as shown in Figure 8 (page 28).

As you can see, most students are clustered well below the 50th percentile in terms of the Student Growth Percentile (SGP), with an average of 27. This means that the average student at this school, when compared with students around the state with similar prior performance on state assessments, scored higher than only 27% of those students. Figures 7 and 8 combined, from





different perspectives, demonstrate that the school’s performance has lagged, and is still lagging with the school’s test scores remaining flat over the years while the state’s scores are rising over the same period. Furthermore, Figure 8 shows ELL students lagged behind Non-ELL students. This led one participant to remark, “we are doing a worse job in ELA than others with the same students.”

### *What are some tips for success?*

- Examining incongruent or conflicting responses between and among participant groups should be explored, as well as links across the data. This may be helpful to the team’s analysis. For example, the organizational assessment data of the school discussed above show that most teachers rate the curriculum as aligned to standards and assessments (see Figure 4); yet a significant group of students are below standard in reading. How do these two observations add up?

*Examining incongruent or conflicting responses between and among participant groups should be explored, as well as links across the data.*

Step Three for a school planning team promotes thoroughness in examining all of the available data, recording the observations of the planning team that is conducting the analysis, asking questions, and keeping an open mind before proceeding to the subsequent steps. The mode of Step Three is largely one of open pursuit, brainstorming, and dialogue. A willingness to probe beyond the obvious will lead to a more thorough review and more reliable analyses.

## Step Four: Identify critical issues in the data.

- Through an analysis of the data, select those areas where significant groups of students are achieving below standard and/or that show student achievement is flat or has declined over time.
- Record issues that emerge from observable patterns in the data.
- Look for similar trends in multiple years of data.
- Compare averages with state, district and demographically similar schools.
- Identify areas of growth and/or strength in student achievement patterns.
- Examine relationships among or between critical issues and events (i.e., mathematics scores are down; Common Core standards adopted during the previous year).

### *Why is this step important?*

Once the team has delved into multiple sources of data about student achievement, classroom and school practices, and student behavior, and developed a list of observations about which there are questions or concerns, the next step is to identify the critical issues that have emerged. The planning team will have examined data through observation, brainstorming, questioning, and dialogue. The list of observations may be long. Now it is time to record what the team believes to be critical for further pursuit so that a more focused analysis can be conducted. It may involve narrowing down or clustering several observations into a single issue. It is this selection of identified issues that will be probed further for causation in Step Five and addressed for improvement by the school community. The goal of this step is to move from areas or questions identified in the data to issue statements, which one can think of as potential hypotheses that will need further investigation and probing.

### *How do we take Step Four—identifying critical issues in the data?*

In Steps Two and Three, planning team members have identified anomalies in the data about which they have questions or concerns and have probed a variety of data for related observations. In Step Four, team members formalize their observations and identify the critical issues in what they have found.

In Step Three, one of the Hillman School team's observations about the achievement data led the group to look more closely at ELL students in Grade 5 and then to see if the qualitative data or the behavioral data suggested any related issues or explanations. The team believed that several critical issues emerged from their line of analysis:

- ELL students perform lower on state assessments than non-ELL students.
- Most students have low scale scores and are not proficient in Grade 5 ELA, regardless of English language proficiency.
- Grade 5 results are characteristic of other grades and subjects for which the same data are available; patterns on other assessments are similar as well.
- The low performance has persisted over time.
- There is broad agreement that curriculum, standards, and assessments are aligned.
- Educators differ from parents and students in their perception about whether the curriculum is relevant to students.

Sorting out from the list of observations what is critical to address further is a matter of asking questions. What will happen if this phenomenon continues? Can the school take steps to address the identified issue? What additional information is available to help the group sort out the significance of the observation? What is likely to happen if the issue is not addressed in the school plan?

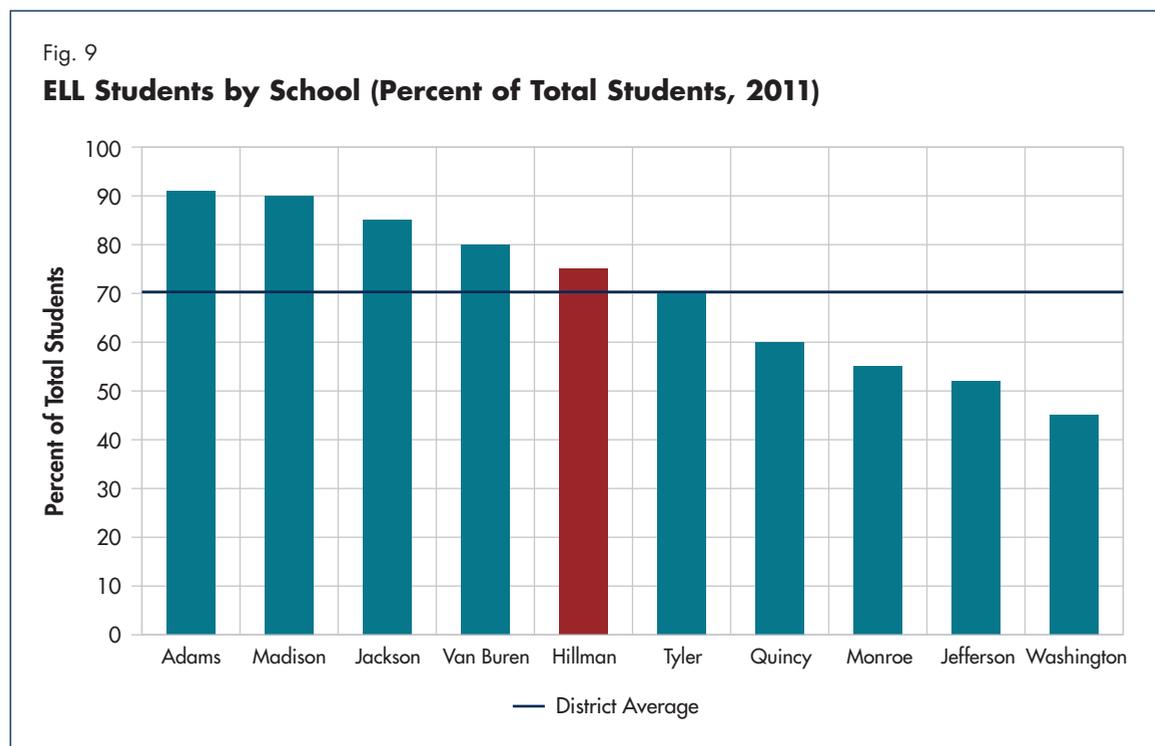
Before identifying these issues as planning priorities (Step Six), the school planning team wanted additional information. Did this school have more students at-risk of low performance than the schools to which it was compared? Did a certain set of students with an identifiable characteristic, such as recent arrival, explain the bulk of the low performance?

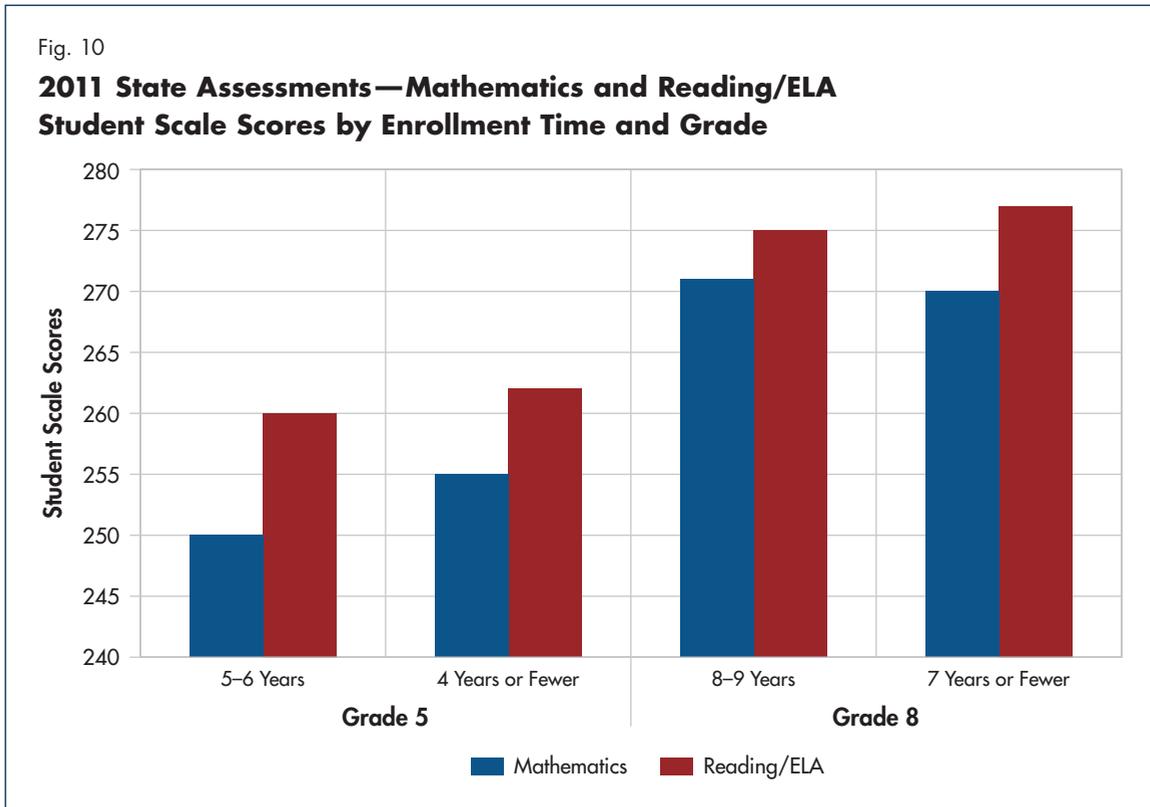
While student performance at the school was low, it took some time for the team to view it as atypical. Over several years, explanations for why adequate yearly progress was unattainable had morphed into explanations for why the state's expectations were too high under the new system. One explanation was that the school had more ELL students than surrounding schools. They examined Figure 9, and found that this was not the case.

One team member shared the fact that not all ELL students were equal. Some, she explained, came from places where formal schooling had been interrupted and others came with more risk factors. Because Hillman received more of these students than other schools, one would expect their scores to be lower and predict that the ELLs who were recent arrivals were driving the low scores in what would otherwise be a reasonably well-performing school.

Again, the job of the facilitator was to examine the explanation by continuing to build a robust enough set of data to allow the team to proceed to Step Five.

To test the hypothesis that students who recently arrived made up the bulk of the lowest performing students, team members examined the data in Figure 10.





This was an unsettling display which caused one team member to exclaim, “The longer students are with us, the worse they do.” While this is not technically true, this presentation cut against the expectations of team members, who expected that students who comprised a stable population, and usually belong to fewer categories commonly thought of as “at-risk,” would naturally perform much better. The perception among team members was beginning to shift.

Most planning teams will have a half dozen or more critical issues on the table at this stage and should not let anything go until the priority-setting step—Step Five.

#### *What are some tips for success?*

- During this step, the planning team will be moving toward more judgments or generalizations, so it is important to keep the data in view as it will help team members to stay focused on the evidence.
- A good question to ask throughout the process is: What alternative explanations might account for the identified issues?
- Step Four may be the time to think about whether additional data are needed (e.g., classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers). Student and parent perceptions of school climate, culture, classroom atmosphere, instructional practices, and discipline can be explored through focus groups or interviews.

*A good question to ask throughout the process is: What alternative explanations might account for the identified issues?*

- If a pattern detected in the school's data is also found in other schools in the district, the team will possibly need to discuss how they may influence a change in the district without giving up responsibility for improvements in their school. Inviting district staff members to share their views and plans is well advised at this juncture.

In summary, the planning team discusses and agrees on critical issues by first agreeing to and recording the group's observations about patterns and trends from the available data as well as any questions that have come up which will help them in probing for cause. Some questions may lead to additional data collection, possibly classroom observations or student interviews; others may lead the group to review some educational literature.

### **Step Five: Probe for causation.**

- Continue to ask questions about observable patterns in the data and about the character of the data with regard to the critical issues identified.
- Develop hypotheses about the possible reasons for the observed patterns and trends.
- Use perceptual, program, and teacher data to test hypotheses and to probe for possible causes.
- Collect additional data and input if needed (i.e., conducting interviews or focus groups with students, parents, and/or teachers on a topic).

#### *Why is this step important?*

Probing for root cause is the most important step in school improvement planning, but it is the step most often overlooked, even by seasoned, astute school leaders. Lack of time, unrealistic deadlines, an inadequately composed team, absence of adopted norms that encourage debate, and a practice of looking exclusively at summative achievement data in the lack of other potentially explanatory data are among the most common reasons why school improvement teams may not give sufficient consideration to probable cause. When this step is glossed over, school teams may propose, fund, and implement programs that address symptoms rather than the root causes of problems.

For example, suppose a middle school team had found that students underperform their peers because they disrespect school rules and are frequently absent and missing instruction of important content. Believing that a disrespect for rules and high absenteeism are the root causes of the achievement gap, a school team may propose an intervention that addresses student behaviors, such as a new attendance or discipline policy. However, it is unlikely that student performance in reading comprehension will improve because the intervention does not address the effect itself.

In examining the data, it is natural to first wonder why, and then, in order to explain achievement disparities, leap to external factors as causes and to remedies that *seem* logical. While it is true that factors external to the school, such as poverty, affect student achievement, there nonetheless exists substantial evidence of schools where, despite such factors, children excel and keep pace with their peers. One study that compared high-performing and low-performing “high need” schools found that high-performing and low-performing high need schools are *not* organized differently. The differences in school performance are found in the school environment, the nature of the instruction, and the leadership.<sup>4</sup>

Fig. 11

**Related Observations from Multiple Sources of Data**

Data Source	Observation, Question, Comment
Standards-based Performance Assessments	
Standardized Achievement Tests	
Benchmark Assessments	
Organizational Assessments	
Behavioral Data	
Classroom Observations	
Other	

*How do we take Step Five—probing for causation?*

It is the role of the planning team to ensure that the practice of probing for causation—getting to the root cause of identified critical issues—is embraced by the school. In this step, the school planning team will return to the critical issues identified in Step Three, supported by observations and findings from the data examined in both Steps Two and Three.

Summarizing observations, findings, and issues onto a grid or chart will help the planning team stay focused on data and the messages that the data reveal. The result will be a school improvement plan that begins and ends with student achievement because not only is the plan data-informed, but also it addresses the root causes of underachievement, many of which can be complex. Figure 11 illustrates one way to capture observations from multiple data sources, using the critical issues and data observations of the school team.

The Hillman School planning team compiled their observations about the persistently low achievement of ELL students. Using the data observations compiled in Figure 11, the team formed several hypotheses—statements that could potentially explain the achievement disparity identified from the data. To form a hypothesis to test the root causes of why ELL students were underperforming compared to similar students at other schools, the team analyzed Figure 11.

In putting it all together, the team formed the following hypothesis: ELL students are not developing academic English fast enough. Why aren't they developing academic English? Could it be that the texts are too difficult? Could it be that the instructional practices are not engaging, relying on quiet seat work? Could it be that some teacher expectations are low?

Probing for cause is not an easy or quick process, but one that pays off with persistence. In attempting to put it all together to identify potential root causes of the achievement gap, the middle school team probed each of their hypotheses further using “The Five Why’s,” a strategy that refers to the practice of asking why at least five times to discover the root cause(s) of a problem; in this case the achievement gap in reading comprehension. The use of the Five Why’s in a non-educational context is illustrated in Figure 1 on page 12.

In applying the Five Why’s to the achievement gap issue and testing their hypothesis, the middle school team came up with the following analysis (see Figure 12):

Fig. 12

**Five Why's**

Problem or Effect:	ELL students are not developing academic English fast enough.
Why aren't ELL students developing academic English more quickly?	Students are not using language in class.
Why aren't students using language in class?	Teachers are trying to maintain control in the classroom and don't want talking to distract from assignments.
Why does talking distract from assignments?	Because it is unrelated to the work students are supposed to be doing.
Why are conversations between students off-task?	Quality academic conversations between students are not a part of the assignments and class culture in the school.
Why is academic conversation not a part of classes in the school?	Teachers did not expect it to be productive and did not think the students' conversations would meet the level of the standards.

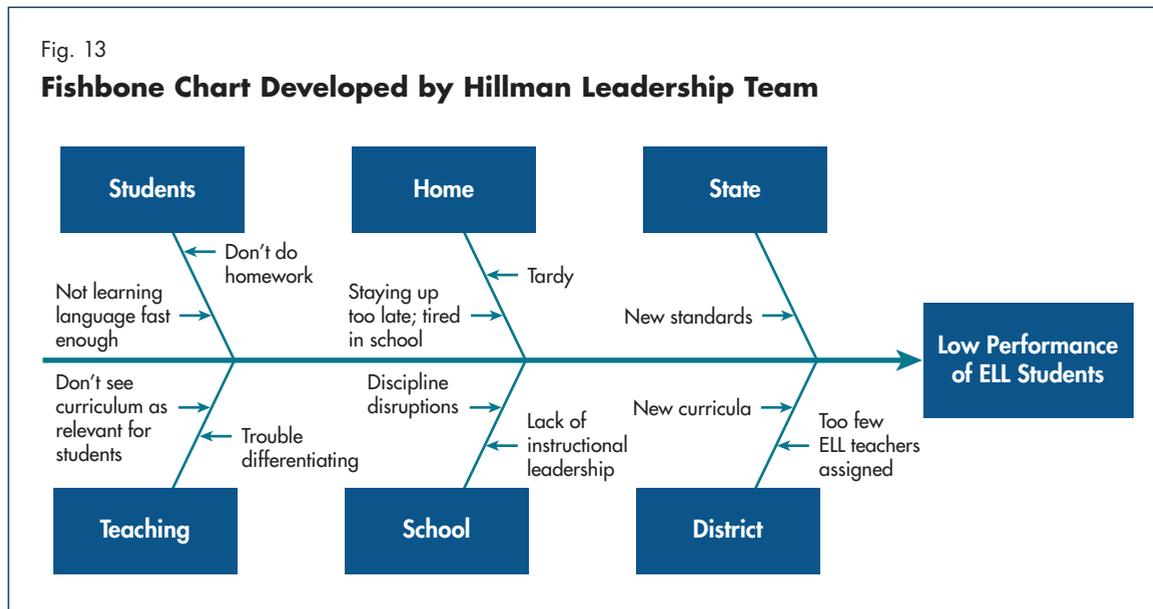
The number of why's should continue until everyone is satisfied with the reason. In the example in Figure 12, the next "why?" would have possibly led to training on how to effectively implement the standards or a discussion of high expectations (uncovered when teachers discussed what they thought the quality of student talk would be). If the team had stopped at the first or even the second why, they might have thrown up their hands, saying, "We can't force students to participate in class." Or the team might have proposed an initiative for student talk that would have been ignored in practice because it didn't address the reasons teachers shied away from it in the first place. In either case, the root cause would have persisted and the achievement gap problem would not have been addressed.

By continuing on with this line of root cause analysis, the school team found out that there is a substantive body of research suggesting what instructional strategies work best for ELL students. Because the team decided that they wanted more information about the teaching practices already underway, they examined aggregate data collected from teacher observations. They found several of the important strategies already in place, but found a gap when it came to the students' structured and unstructured use of oral language in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> Not having or acting on this information affected instruction for all students, but appears to have impacted ELL students disproportionately.

There may be more than one cause or a set of interrelated causes for an observed phenomenon. In actuality, the planning team answered the first "why" in multiple ways. A portion of the focus was on the perception that students did not have support from parents. The school team used the cause-and-effect or fishbone diagram and categorized their observations into the following possible causes. A further description of the fishbone diagram is provided under "Data Analysis Tools for Standard Bearer Schools" in Section I.

Where there are multiple causes, they may be interdependent. For example, teacher knowledge and time may be related to the ability to design lessons making use of student discussion. English language acquisition may not improve if classroom expectations are low or if the school conditions are not welcoming.

Remember that Standard Bearer Schools is recursive, and in this case a discussion about what the school could most influence (part of Step Six) helped the team decide the causes on which to focus. They also were helped by further discussion about some of the other causes they identified.



For instance, the team was not unified on whether parents were supporting students' education at home. One team member pointed out that in light of the performance of ELL students at other schools, there was no particular reason to believe that the parents at this school were significantly different. Also, a team member pointed out that even though the focus of this discussion was on the ELL students in particular, the performance of most students was low, and the cause was therefore something likely to affect all students.

### *What are some tips for success?*

- When probing for causation, exploring the relationships between and among student achievement, organizational assessment, and observational data will usually be the most productive.
- When probing to understand the root causes of achievement or behavior problems, a focus on factors or reasons over which the school has either control or influence will be empowering for the team.
- If one root cause analysis strategy seems to stall with team members, another one will likely work. A more structured strategy like the fishbone diagram may be easier to use initially and can be a better choice where multiple causes or inputs are contributing to the effect or output.
- Avoid the blame game, as in: "If those elementary teachers had only taught . . ." If the data indicate that an issue may be related to a practice in the early grades, representatives of those grade levels and/or district resource staff should be invited to participate in a discussion and contribute to the solution.

Step Five is a critical one in setting the planning team down the pathway to interventions and improvement strategies that will work. Getting to the root cause or causes of an issue means hypothesizing possible reasons and continuing to probe or dig deeper until the reasons are plausible and significant. It is also the time to give up on non-productive lines of reasoning and to follow the evidence until it yields an explanation.

## Step Six: Determine priorities for improvement.

- Determine what the school *can change* (programs, processes, professional knowledge and skills); what it *may influence* (behavior, parent involvement, communication); and where it *may need to intervene* (pre-school, tutorials, parent visits, etc.).
- Select a manageable number of priorities as the focus of school improvement. The priorities should be grounded in the root causes of the critical issues identified in Steps Four and Five.

### *Why is this step important?*

A relevant maxim is “having too many priorities is the same as having no priorities.”

When moving from probable root causes of student underperformance to determining school improvement priorities, school teams will discover that there are many variables to

be considered. In order to select a manageable number of priorities, planning teams will have to determine what choices will most likely address the root causes and be beneficial to student learning. These decisions require a structured process based on thoughtful discussions and supportive data. Major outcomes for Step Six include identifying and working with the issues that matter most to student learning and concentrating on those areas where the school can actually have some control or impact. This step seeks to answer the question of which causes and/or issues should receive the most attention in the next year’s school plan to achieve the greatest gains for students, keeping in mind that not everything can be done in one year.

*Having too many priorities is the same as having no priorities.*

### *How do we take Step Six—determining priorities for improvement?*

The team will need to agree that not all of the identified causes or problems can be addressed within a year’s plan so that a manageable number of priorities are chosen for extensive work. As decisions are made, data or evidence should be revisited as needed. Based on their root cause analyses, the team should compose a list of the identified causes for student underperformance on which the planning team agrees. A common arrangement is to list all topics for discussion, including continuing priorities from the current year’s plan; however, consideration can be given to listing topics by related items, by grade level needs, or by subjects or categories such as reading, computation skills, climate, teaching and learning, or parent involvement. If the district has a format for school planning with requirements for objectives in specific categories or areas, it may be helpful to begin to arrange priorities by those areas at this time.

After the initial ranking, categorize the issues. In one group, place issues under the direct control of the school. In another group, place issues that cannot be readily impacted at the school or classroom level. Home factors are commonly cited as an area that cannot be impacted by the school; however, school-to-home strategies should not be arbitrarily discounted since creative partnerships may be cultivated for positive results in some areas. This may appear to be a continuum more than two distinct categories.

Next, consider the issues according to how much they impact learning. Each issue may have some validity but it is important to select those with the strongest correlation to student learning.

Finally, ask such questions as: Are targeted groups (i.e., low income students in a Title I school) given priority by the district or state? Are the selections reasonable and feasible as related to the readiness and capabilities of staff and students?

The planning team should next narrow the list to the top 3, 4, 5, or any number of priorities that the team has agreed beforehand is a manageable workload. Once the reduced list is compiled, the team will rank order according to the neediest areas, providing a rationale for each choice, such as “third grade scores in reading comprehension have decreased by 19 percentile points over a two-year period.” Or “there is a substantial increase in the dropout rate in Grade 11.” Ask such questions as “What are the anticipated outcomes for success for each priority?” “Will the school budget support the decisions?”

The team should also identify a second tier of issues of interest for secondary attention or monitoring. Although a limited number of causes should be targeted for major focus, it is important to recall that all areas were believed to have been important to school improvement and should not be dropped from the extended agenda of the team.

Note that some priorities are hierarchical, with progress on some determining the ability to work on others. The Hillman School planning team, described in Steps Two–Five, prioritized the infrequency of student talk in class.

Finally, all stakeholders should be made aware of the priorities chosen and the rationale for making the selection in keeping with the commitment to keep stakeholders informed.

### *What are some tips for success?*

- Assess current plan activities against any newly emerging priorities. Continue to consider priorities which show or have the potential to show progress. Avoid keeping pet projects that have not been successful, as well as doing a complete overhaul without carefully analyzing the worth of each priority.
- Make decisions that benefit the entire school rather than support allegiance to a special program. The exception is targeting subgroups in order to close the achievement gap as required by law.
- Make immediate changes where it is clear that an issue which may become a health or safety crisis has been identified. For instance, a safety incident is a good example of a condition that should be addressed at once by the principal.
- Consider a display of the causes which can be physically manipulated. Writing causes on index cards, and posting them, can allow for them to be physically ranked according to how important the team thinks the cause is, top-to-bottom. Left-to-right, the causes can be ranked by how much influence the team has over the cause. The cluster of causes in the top left become the priorities.

At the conclusion of Step Six, some of the most difficult work of the school team has been completed and the priority improvement areas have been selected. However, as the team moves through the next steps, it will be important to keep in mind how these priorities were determined, what causes are being addressed, and what evidence supported the decision, so that the point is not lost in subsequent steps.

## Step Seven: Develop strategies.

- Search for potential strategies to address the priority improvement areas.
- Use educational research findings or best practices as a decision-making tool when selecting and developing strategies.
- Plan strategies to address the priority improvement areas.
- Determine when professional development is the strategy itself and when it is a support for the implementation of another strategy.
- Consider conducting small action research projects or pilots to test out strategies before deciding on full implementation.
- Consider how the planning team will know that a strategy is producing the desired result.

### *Why is this step important?*

In school planning, one lesson holds true over and over again. As noted earlier in this guide, data mean nothing without a planned response. Clearly, if student achievement is to improve and gaps to narrow or close, school improvement planning teams will have to select strategies carefully, making sure that the strategies are research-based, have a proven track record, and have been implemented successfully in schools with similar characteristics. Moreover, school improvement planning will not result in improved academic achievement unless strategies address the root causes of academic underperformance and are manageable by the school staff. As the staff and team begin to research strategies to address the priorities, it will be wise to preset some criteria so that the siren call of publisher strategies and materials do not pull the team off track.

### *How do we take Step Seven—developing strategies?*

This stage of school improvement planning can be complicated because there may be a half dozen or more priorities, each with a set of problems and root causes. However, most planning teams like this step because it is a positive action on behalf of students. Researching strategies is too time-consuming to take place in a team meeting, but organizing for research is realistic. It may be helpful to break into small “design teams” where each team is assigned a priority area. Or it may be preferable to “jigsaw” tasks; for example, one person can search for potential strategies; another can vet strategies by contacting schools with similar needs; and another can create a chart that summarizes problems, root causes, proposed strategies, costs, and scheduling requirements. Jigsawing tasks is time-efficient, gets everyone actively involved, and fosters a culture of interdependence among team members—a characteristic of a professional community. Placing a teacher on each of the design teams ensures that a member of the faculty becomes conversant with each priority area. Researching strategies may be a task where staff members and/or parents who were unable to commit to the full calendar of planning meetings can join in.

Other important considerations are the number of strategies a school embraces in a given year and the potential impediments to implementation. Research and practice suggest that schools have too many programs, some of which, while having merit, are not appropriate to address the identified issues of the school, thereby exhausting resources and getting few results.<sup>6</sup> Many schools with low academic performance and an abundance of programs continue to fail while spending

money indiscriminately, even as teachers report that new programs feel like burdens. Hence, implementation is weak or spotty.

The school's readiness to implement its strategies is a final consideration. Strategies may be new ways of doing things to attack or cure a new or persistent problem. Research and practice have shown that change may be difficult at times and should be approached through different perspectives or lenses:<sup>7</sup> structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. What *structural changes* (e.g., scheduling a double-block) will we have to make to implement the proposed strategy? Do we have the *teaching staff* and the *skills* required to implement the strategy, and what *professional development* will we need to plan into the budget? What are the *political implications* of selecting and implementing the strategy? Will something have to be eliminated? How can the planning team navigate the political waters of programs competing for an often shrinking well of resources? And finally, will the strategy violate a *cultural norm* or remove a "sacred cow" and if so, how will the team mediate any tension that may follow?

Fostering faculty commitment to proposed changes is well worth the time, energy, and expense. There are several ways to build teacher buy-in for a new strategy that the team has selected to address a root cause. One of those is to form study groups where teachers read journal articles and discuss the strategy and its appropriateness to their school; another approach is conducting a site visit to a school with similar demographics that has successfully implemented the strategy; still another is having an expert visit the school and present the strategy based on the school's high priority needs. Finally, phasing the strategy in or piloting and gradually building a broader group of advocates may be the best implementation approach.

Data-informed school improvement planning means that data inform decisions at the beginning, during, and the end of the school improvement planning process. In other words, it is important to develop a plan to assess the strategy (interim and end-of-year): Is it being implemented? If not, why not and what can be done to ensure faithful implementation? Is the strategy delivering interim or mid-term results (e.g., are more students talking in classrooms, have students improved performance on the ELL assessment)? Did the achievement gap narrow on summative high stakes tests? The team may wish to assign someone to assess the strategy.

In the Hillman example, the team developed a protocol for peer observations to measure the amount and quality of both student and teacher talk during class. This became an instructional priority—not at the expense of other initiatives—but gave grade-level teams particularly a strong focus for collaboration.

### *What are some tips for success?*

- The process of selecting new strategies may lead to the need to discard other strategies or practices in order for the new strategy (strategies) to be successful.
- Changes in strategy have the greatest impact on teachers so additional opportunities for teachers to ask questions and dialogue will be helpful at this stage.
- Priorities should guide strategy decisions since it may be tempting to cover everything in one year by proposing too many strategies. Too much change can result in weak implementation and poor results.

In Step Seven, the team sets up a process for researching strategies, including (1) the method (e.g., jigsawing the tasks, inviting other staff members and parents to participate); (2) setting a

reasonable number of new strategies to introduce in a year; and, (3) viewing strategies through four lenses—structural, human resources, political, and symbolic/cultural. Though the tasks may be distributed, it will be important for the team to vet all of the information and make the final decisions.

### **Step Eight: Review and revise the school plan.**

- Communicate with stakeholders about the planning process and opportunities for input.
- Evaluate the progress on previous improvement plan activities.
- Consider how the new priorities fit into the current plan.
- Ascertain that the budget will support the improvement priorities.
- Draft a proposal for the revision of the school plan that includes the rationale for any change and the impact on resources (staff and funds).
- Include a description of the rationale for implementing a new strategy, the expected results, and the planned evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy.

#### *Why is this step important?*

The existing school plan is the roadmap by which the school is operating in the current year. In order for new ideas to fill ongoing or newly discovered needs, it is essential that the current plan be reviewed to assess what progress has been made; what still may need attention; and what needs to be added in order to have a solid and relevant school plan, which when implemented, will lead to increased student achievement.

Developing a new plan does not mean abandoning everything in the existing plan. Rather a review allows the school team to take a look at the goals and results of the plan. The team will want to ask questions, and the answers must justify keeping or eliminating portions of the plan. After reading each major goal and objective to get a grasp of exactly what was intended in the existing plan, some possible questions for discussion include:

- What has been accomplished? Were we successful in reaching our goals? If not, what happened? Is it too soon to know?
- Do we have the same concerns now that we had last year?
- Are new data leading to new thinking about achievement issues?
- Do key areas need to be revised?

At this point in the Ten-Step Process, two plans are intersecting—the current year’s plan and the proposed plan for the upcoming year. In Step Eight, the current plan will need to be reviewed to yield the following information: (1) the level of success to date of each objective; (2) the recommendation to maintain, revise, or eliminate an objective; and, (3) an assessment of the feasibility of those items that will be continued. Some items considered for elimination will be ones that are complete (institutionalized), but others may be ones that are not supported by the data for continuation. Those listed for continuation in the new plan will need ongoing or second phase implementation strategies.

When a new program has been fully implemented, it is institutionalized or ongoing, and it no longer needs to be in the improvement plan. Elements of the current plan that are incomplete

or require additional phases of implementation will necessitate consideration in tandem with the proposed new priorities as the plan is revised.

Some school plans show a list of ongoing items that never seem to have a completion point. Lack of timelines, evaluation techniques, and critical revision may lead to plans that are too long or to a feeling in the school that it is the same plan every year. On the other hand, dropping everything out of the current plan, without ensuring that objectives have been met and institutionalized, contributes to the feeling that every year is a completely new agenda or the “program *du jour*” syndrome.

### *How do we take Step Eight—reviewing and revising the school plan?*

A school planning team developed the current year’s plan with input from staff and other stakeholders. The same or a similar team of representative constituents should participate in the review in order to get a variety of views. It is likely that the team is composed of some, if not all, of the previous year’s contributors. New members should be brought up to date with the previous year’s work.

The planning team should establish ground rules for the review and make clear that decisions will be based on supportive evidence. Time and circumstances may have resulted in different perspectives that need to be heard. Any differing of views should be discussed and consensus reached according to ground rules laid out by the committee.

Ground rules should contain a rubric or formula for evaluating the existing plan. The overall goals and the accompanying objectives should be reviewed. Next, look at the data supporting the strategies and results. What has been accomplished? What is yet to be achieved? After careful review, a format similar to the ones shown in Figures 14 and 15 may be used to assess the *level of success* for each objective and accompanying strategies and whether they fit into the recently determined needs identified in prior steps of the Ten-Step Process.

In reviewing the plan, the team should be cautious in making changes. There may be various reasons why an objective was not achieved. Perhaps it was because the materials arrived late for a given program. It may be that progress was made but the objective was unrealistic for the expected gains. An intervention program may not have reached the needs of a targeted subgroup or staffing may not have been implemented according to the intended instructional practices. Also, results of the final assessment of the program may not yet be available.

Fig. 14

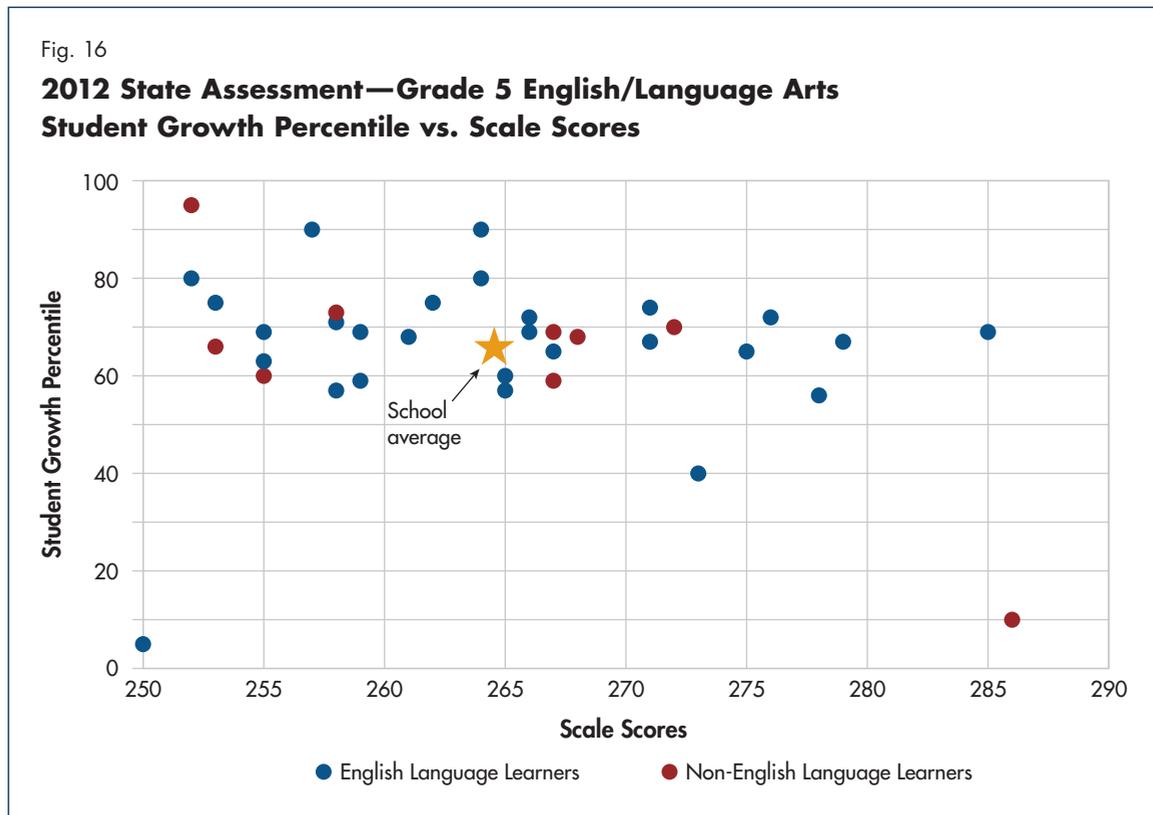
#### **Assessment of Level of Success**

	Beyond Expectation	Achieved as Expected	Substantial Progress	Limited Progress
Objective 1				
Objective 2				

Fig. 15

#### **Status of Objectives**

	Maintain	Revise	Eliminate	Related Area
Objective 1				
Objective 2				



For example, after a year of implementation, the Hillman team looked at the data in Figure 16. While scale scores increased by an average of 3 points in the subsequent year (something that had occurred previously), the sharp increase in Student Growth Percentiles (something that had never occurred previously) suggested that the team was on the right track. The team may wish to discuss what led to these improvements and continue to employ similar strategies that lead to continued improvements in ELA. In as much as it is a core area, it may also be related to new priority areas.

After finding the best strategies to improve achievement, including additions and deletions, it becomes necessary to check the budget to match dollars with strategies and activities. This step is not introduced prior to this time to ensure that the search for the very best strategies to address causal factors occurs without the concern of funding.

Throughout the process, decisions are made continuously as each aspect is reasoned out. Begin with the most important priorities and assign the dollar amounts. While it would be great if the budget could accommodate all the desired strategies, in the event this is not possible, additional decisions must be made. Questions may include the following:

- Can we be effective if we reduce the amount or numbers associated with the strategies?
- Is there a close substitute for the first choice of strategy for a given objective?
- What can be done without additional funds?
- What supplies or services can be carried over from the previous year?
- Is there anything in the current plan that will continue the new ideas?
- Are new funding sources likely to appear later in the year? Can the team be ready to take advantage of those?

Evaluate each strategy using a format similar to the one shown in Figure 17, and make a decision to implement, revise, or postpone.

Revising the school plan involves a formal comparison between the current plan activities that need to be continued (because they are incomplete or have been modified) and the newly proposed priorities. Visualization is helpful with abstract material. Items can be listed in columns or on flipcharts so that the planning team can look for overlaps, redundancies, and inconsistencies. Analyze carefully. Incomplete information or faulty assumptions may be behind anything that appears inconsistent or in conflict.

The team will also want to identify old and new priorities that can be integrated. For example, a priority of improving problem solving through computer technology may become integrated with the current year's implementation of a mathematics professional development plan. The team should be willing to give up on old strategies where there is no evidence of any benefit to students after an appropriate period of implementation has occurred. When the planning team has identified priority items from the current and new plan, they will want to reorganize the plan under broad categories and reprioritize activities so that the size is not overwhelming and so that each item can be budgeted for adequately.

During this step, timelines, proposed target dates for completion, evaluation strategies, and roles and responsibilities can be added. A strong plan will have a distribution of roles and responsibilities rather than turning the accountability for implementation over to the principal alone. Timelines can be extended or amended but they should never be ignored.

Also at this step, the planning form that is required by the district will dictate the final format of the proposed new plan; however, the decisions and strategies reflected in the plan will be those of the school. Though most school planning forms or protocols provided by districts do not ask for narrative rationales, it is important for the planning team at this point to tell the story of how the new plan emerged. What is the evidence? What are the assumptions? What are the expected outcomes and how will they be measured or evaluated? This narrative can be an introduction to the new plan or an addendum at the end of the plan.

*Analyze carefully. Incomplete information or faulty assumptions may be behind anything that appears inconsistent or in conflict.*

Fig. 17

### Strategy Evaluation

	Priority	Projected Cost	Other Options	Decision
Strategy 1				
Strategy 2				

### *What are some tips for success?*

- Involve stakeholders beyond the team to secure broader-based views about the current progress toward improved student achievement.
- Develop a culture in the school that supports an annual plan revision and renewal by taking into consideration evidence of accomplishment to help all stakeholders remain open-minded and focused on student outcomes.
- Set criteria for success and conduct annual assessments each time programs are introduced. This can help make the process objective. It is not unusual for school staff to become attached to programs, even those that fail to show results. However, it is important not to dismiss a program out of hand if it has not been fully implemented or funded.
- Seek in-house or in-kind strategies that will assist in relieving the budgetary requirements if necessary.
- Take time to clarify. Some items may appear to be similar in nature but actually address a different group, grade, or subject.
- Create specific objectives (rather than general ones, such as improve reading comprehension) to help address the specific cause amenable to evaluation.
- Remember that the priorities, objectives and strategies of the current year's plan have a rationale and a constituency. Any modifications should be communicated well.
- Set interim checkpoints and be prepared to make mid-course corrections if implementation is spotty.

In Step Eight, the team will find again that taking time to process the current plan together with the new priorities and using data to support decisions reflects good judgment. Even if the school had a huge budget and could afford to address all priorities, it is not necessarily the best pathway to successful implementation.

All of the work of the planning team comes together in a new plan for the upcoming school year. As difficult as planning work is, implementation is harder. It can be made even more difficult if the planning team has not been clear and specific in writing out the plan and connecting it to the analyses that led them to this particular plan for improvement. Though most school planning teams try to plan for continuity of membership and staff leadership, any of those things can change, so the plan should be understandable to a new principal and a new planning team.

### **Step Nine: Share decisions and revise again as needed.**

- Share the key elements and actions of the proposed plan and solicit input from representatives of all stakeholders.
- Determine staff needs for successful implementation.
- Agree on implementation activities, dates, and timelines for completion.
- Revise the proposed plan into final form.

### *Why is this step important?*

Step Nine is valuable to elicit input on the proposed plan and to gain overall approval of the final school improvement document.

This process is coming full circle from the standpoint of engagement of all stakeholders, which is a major tenet of Standard Bearer Schools. Even though the planning team may have provided many occasions throughout the year for input into decision making, this is an opportunity for staff, parents, other involved community participants, and students, where applicable, to provide feedback on the document and influence its readiness for full presentation and implementation.

A comprehensive presentation of the plan to others, accompanied with opportunities for their input, produces the most fruitful initial step in this process. Reviewing the entire plan at one time allows this broad-based constituency to see how parts were progressively formed and cemented to create a needs-driven document. Signing off on the final plan also promotes ownership for the forward movement of school goals to improve student performance. This important step not only satisfies mandated paper documentation but moreover promotes authentic sharing and closure to the process of school improvement planning.

### *How do we take Step Nine—sharing decisions and revising again as needed?*

The formal planning team will first review the proposed school plan as a unit before sharing with others. All members should be knowledgeable about their work and prepared to answer questions about the plan. The principal will facilitate communications to staff, parents, and other involved community members indicating that the proposed plan is available for review. The full plan should be made available during this period, but a summary of objectives and key changes for the next school year will encourage stakeholders to review the plan.

During informational sharing meetings, present an overview of the entire plan. Details on the major points may include information on pertinent data, findings, research, issues, rationale, strategies, assessments, and points on implementation. Staff members—the chief implementers of the plan—need the opportunity to agree to such features as the timeline and what support and accountability measures are included. Additionally, it should be clear what implementation requires of staff members. Likewise, it is important to engage parents and other representatives in the review as their comments and questions enrich the process and provide other perspectives about the plan for their children and the school. During this time, parents are able to progress from important but passive forms of involvement such as attending a school concert or chaperoning a field trip to this higher level of participation. Parent engagement advances from mere involvement as a supporter to establishing a more active partnership with the school, engaging in such activities as collaborating, modeling, summarizing, defending, revising and presenting. Student contributions often shed light into specific and related areas within the plan relative to school climate, classroom approaches and techniques, parent involvement, curricular relevancy, general motivational issues, and other key factors which enhance or impede student performance.

Creative methods as well as routine modes of communication such as through the Parent Teacher Association may be used to encourage parents to participate in this important review. Within the school setting, faculty, grade-level and subject-area teams, departmental, and student council meetings continue to be good venues to review the tenets of the proposed school plan. Announcements and postings in the teacher resource room also assist in spreading the word. The office or media center may also be convenient locations where copies of the full draft can be

checked out for review. It is at the discretion of the school whether to expand communications to a larger audience.

A vehicle for submitting comments, suggestions, and questions to the planning team should be made available along with a timeline for responding. Rationale for suggestions should be included with supportive information, materials or other references, as practical. The school planning team should consider all responses for revisions using a structured vetting process. Necessary revisions to the proposed plan should be completed with team sign-off resulting in a completed school improvement plan. The final revision is then entered into the district format and viewed as ready for implementation.

### *What are some tips for success?*

- Complete this step with transparency and seriousness in the request for input from all stakeholders. Be willing to include or adapt new ideas that prove to enrich the current body of work under review.
- Create charts, graphs, and similar aids that capture how the team used the evidence found in the data to foster informed discussion. Reference critical segments of the plan such as scientifically-based research associated with exemplary methods and instructional strategies. Value also may be gained by appending narratives, descriptions, and selected artifacts of the process to further add clarity that supports the plan.
- Involve parents in a decision-making mode which elevates them toward the desired levels so often encouraged in research and listed in district goals. The thoughts and feelings about the draft plan should be voiced through the various lenses of a broad-based constituency.

Even though the planning team may have provided many opportunities throughout the year for input into the decision making, this last opportunity for staff, in particular, and others to provide feedback is critical. Some people become more aware at this point and will have helpful recommendations. Staff members, particularly, need the opportunity to agree to the timeline. They also will want to evaluate implementation strategies in order to determine what will be needed to support new strategies or changes in processes or materials.

Step Nine concludes with the finished product—a school improvement plan to guide the actions of the school for the upcoming year. This new plan is fueled by a rigorous and thorough review of the proposed plan coupled with a second review with expanded shareholder input, providing a double check on the comprehensiveness and credibility of the work. The planning team's entry of information into the district format completes the process to the satisfaction of all stakeholders, resulting in the vision of how the school can operate to accomplish the goal of improved student performance to the fullest for all students. From this point it is encouraging to work toward the fundamental standard that great school planning paves the way for successful implementation.

## Step Ten: Implement the new plan.

- Begin the new school term with a review of the plan's priorities and strategies.
- Designate plan monitors to help the school stay on task, provide updates, and celebrate milestones.
- Review the new achievement data from the latest state-mandated assessment and begin the process again.

### *Why is this step important?*

While the planning process is one of creative and critical thinking, the implementation process is one of regular tasks and routines, including ongoing monitoring, and if necessary, troubleshooting, adjusting, or correcting. School improvement depends on both planning and implementation. A landscape designer imagines and creates a design for a beautiful garden, but it is workers with shovels, wheelbarrows, nursery plants, and other materials and equipment who implement the design. School planning staff are often playing both roles—designer and worker. No matter how perfect a plan is, it will not implement itself.

Atul Gawande writes, “Every change requires effort, and the decision to make that effort is a social process.”<sup>8</sup> The implementation phase not only consists of regular tasks and routines, but *changed* tasks and routines. This is why Steps One–Nine are so important—building the trust for change. However, face-to-face communication is how a new standard is developed and maintained.<sup>9</sup> People tend to follow those they know and trust in deciding what new practice to attempt. This step is about strategically spreading research-based responses to the most pressing priorities of the school.

### *How do we take Step Ten—implementing the new plan?*

As the academic calendar is planned to include the Ten-Step Process, so should the calendar reflect the tasks and completion dates for implementing the current plan. Design or make a calendar for the new plan at the end of the year since many tasks in the new plan will need to be completed before school is out or during the summer, such as ordering materials, reorganizing classroom spaces, or arranging professional development.

The faculty can begin the year with a review of the plan—what has been accomplished in the summer and who will be monitoring the various activities. There is a tendency for things to continue the way that they have been going—organizational inertia—even with a plan for change. Staff, students, and parents may need bridges from the old to the new. Think carefully about crafting face-to-face, job-embedded opportunities for practicing what is new alongside trusted peers. Principals should ensure that there are not administrative impediments to the proposed changes.

Implementation may go awry if the new initiatives are (1) not the right ones to match the need; (2) too numerous to manage; (3) impeded by the organizational structure; (4) embedded in an unsupportive culture; (5) staffed indiscriminately; (6) not communicated with a consistent language; (7) not monitored systematically; and (8) expected to create overnight change or be a panacea.<sup>10</sup> Potential impediments are best prevented by planning rather than repairing, but mid-course corrections should always be an option if the implementation veers off target or proves to be ineffective.

It is, of course, also a good time to review the new achievement data for any obvious changes—both to celebrate and/or to make any last minute adjustments. The arrival of the new data signals the formal beginning of the new planning process.

### *What are some tips for success?*

- The team leader should include the current school plan in site meetings as the new planning process begins. If for any reason something in the current plan needs to be modified or adjusted, do it immediately so that valuable efforts are not misplaced as the year gets underway.
- Patience is a virtue in school planning. Changes can be difficult even when people have had input and have agreed to the change. This may be because the change has not been completely thought through and small complications can crop up. Address each complication and keep the plan on point and on schedule.

Step Ten is the end of the planning process and the beginning of implementation, but it is not the time for school planning teams to turn their back on the new plan. If difficulties arise in the implementation, the team should be prepared to assist with re-orienting or re-directing the plan, as needed.

Anyone who has followed the Ten-Step Process or used the tools will never again think of school planning as a *pro forma* activity that the school has to get through. Principals who have used Standard Bearer Schools along with the tools find that new priorities, new directions, and new commitments emerge. It is empowering for school communities to know that they can make a difference for students by knowing just the right areas of the school program to adjust. It is easy to imagine how satisfied the school planning team felt as the state assessment scores for ELL students increased and how willing they will be in the future to tackle the next impediment to student learning. Success breeds success in schools.

## Endnotes

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# SECTION III

## Additional Information and Resources

### **Standard Bearer Schools Roles and Responsibilities**

*District staff members* have essential roles and responsibilities to carry out in the school improvement planning process. These may be organized and delegated in various ways within a district, but the critical components include (1) a clear message about teaching and learning expectations, preferably from the superintendent; (2) a curriculum and instruction system that is aligned to expectations, including teaching materials and assessments; (3) a data technology system that assists with collecting data and providing timely and accessible data reports to schools as well as software that allows schools to manipulate their own data; (4) a special programs management system that works cooperatively with school planning teams to ensure accountability for students in need of extra support, such as English language learners and students with disabilities; and, (5) a human resources department that makes data-based decisions in regard to the type of professional development that supports principals and teachers in school improvement.

*Principals* bear most of the direct responsibility for the school improvement process, working the steps into an already busy schedule. Those involved in Standard Bearer Schools usually find that the planning schedule for the academic year assists them in conducting a quality planning process. Ultimately, as principals and teams become more practiced, time is saved

and outcomes are improved, making everyone feel that the process is worthwhile. As the deadline nears and the plan comes together, the principal especially will be glad of the time given throughout the year. Though principals often choose to lead their teams and should always serve on them, over time, others on the team will be able to take on the leadership tasks.

*Teachers* add value to the planning process in many ways. Several teachers will serve directly on the planning team, others will participate in some of the research or piloting tasks of the team, and all teachers will provide input to the process by completing the OAS. Teachers should plan to read agendas and minutes and keep up with what is happening during the team meetings, offering input into the process as needed. School planning updates can be a regular part of monthly faculty meetings.

*Parents* have a unique perspective on the school, and like teachers, can share this in various ways. A few parents will serve on the planning team, some will be involved in other volunteer activities, but all parents can give input by completing the OAS. In the planning process, parent team members need not feel that they have to be overnight education experts, but rather they should be willing to share their perspectives and openly ask questions about data and school processes. Parents who use their own informal communication networks to talk about the school and how it is improving are providing an invaluable service. Research on parent involvement shows a positive impact on student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the children of parents who actively show that they care about the quality of the school, as well as other children in the school, will see a model of community involvement that they may emulate in later years.

*Students* of all ages see ways that their schools can be better. From Grade 6 up, student representatives can participate on the planning team and complete the OAS. Younger students can participate in class meetings where they consider how to improve their classroom and their school, as well as what it is about their school that is especially helpful to them. They can also complete a modified version of the OAS. Focus groups of students can be convened when more information about school conditions or validation of data observations are needed in the planning process.

*Others in the community or at the district* may be invited or asked to participate on the planning team. It is especially helpful to have a person from a nearby or neighborhood business because they are impacted daily by the presence of the school and its students. Neighborhood agencies that provide services to the families of the children in the school, such as recreation, social, or police services, can be very helpful team members. If the district provides content support staff, one may wish to be on the team to share expertise.

## **The Value and Power of Parent Involvement**

Educators are increasingly aware of the importance of involving parents in the education of their children. This thinking is not new; the difference is that either through professional awareness, mandates, or both there is an increasing urgency toward successfully bringing this challenge to fruition. Research continues to show that parental encouragement and assistance contribute to students' higher achievement, better social skills, and higher aspirations. This is true across socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds for students of all ages.<sup>2</sup>

State and federal mandates pave the way for powerful parent involvement. For example, Title I makes clear the type, degree, and extent of parent involvement expected. It specifies a full partnership with the school and includes participation on advisory committees and, as appropriate, in school decision making to assist in the education of their child.

“There is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for parent involvement. Everyone wants more and better involvement, but most educators need help in how to develop productive programs of school–family–community partnerships.” These are the sentiments of Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children’s Learning at Johns Hopkins University, who developed a framework of Six–Types of Involvement for parent involvement which has become the standard of the field and appears in various adaptations throughout research in this area. The six types of involvement are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Dr. Epstein defines a comprehensive family–school partnership as an ongoing relationship rather than a program or event. The framework is often accompanied by lists of sample practices and activities to describe the involvement more fully, including the challenges inherent in fostering each type of parent involvement, as well as the expected results of implementing them for students, parents, and teachers.<sup>3</sup>

The Epstein framework is heralded throughout research literature relative to parent involvement. For example: building upon the six types of parent involvement, the National Parent Teacher Association (National PTA) created program standards of excellence; the U.S. Department of Education uses them as a base in School Improvement Grants and Appleseed Learning Centers’ National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) set national standards based on the framework.

### *Reported Causes of Low Parent Involvement*

If parent involvement is a known necessity for student progress, why aren’t all schools filled with parents who are involved in meaningful ways? Why aren’t children benefitting from this cooperative effort? Parents would benefit knowing that they are active contributors in their child’s education and the morale of school staff would be lifted as this would support the effective teaching in classrooms and overall school goals overseen by principals for student and school improvement.

The responsibility for improving parent involvement is three–fold: the administrator, the staff, and the parents. It may be surprising to some to find that the area of school planning that most concerns principals is that of parent involvement in school improvement—not necessarily because they do not welcome involvement, but because they feel that parents cannot or do not want to be involved. It also may be the case that parent involvement in other school activities is limited or inconsistent as well. While not directly planned, a resulting response to the apparent lack of parent interest or involvement too often is to cease asking for it or to ask a smaller and smaller number of parents who are interested to give more and more time. Ceasing to ask gives parents tacit approval to not be involved in the school and it may suggest to some parents that their involvement is not valued or desired.

While many schools have found ways to have a productive and fruitful relationship with parents to reach student and school goals, more often this is not the case. As mentioned, educators often lament about low levels of parent involvement. Some believe parents are unrealistic in their expectations of the school, are not interested in what is happening with their children and hold little value in education. Parents however, maintain they are interested in their children’s education but do not feel welcome in their school or have issues with the personal attitudes of school personnel and the individual styles of those who lead their schools. Parents often identify three major barriers that prevent them from becoming involved: time and life demands, lack of clarity on what is expected of them and in what specific ways they can help their child at home, and various

factors in the school environment. Further, the experience of the parent with schools from their own education may contribute to the relationship a parent may build with the school of their child. Clearly, knowing this means there is a need to explore these causes, real or perceived, about low parental involvement and effectively plan to improve or eliminate the problem.

### *Parents in Standard Bearer Schools*

Standard Bearer Schools seeks to help schools with the issue of parent involvement in various ways. It is understood that often, even with the best efforts of the school, the challenge of parents as partners is not met. Unfortunately, in many cases one important factor is that there is no structured plan for a partnership between home and school.

Parent involvement can be put into several stations or tier designations, i.e., Tier 1 may see parents following instructions of the school by checking homework and making sure their children are on time and have the necessary supplies; Tier 2 may have engagement as a chaperone on field trips, participating in fundraisers and joining the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO); Tier 3 may include parents attending PTO meetings and volunteering in classrooms; and, Tier 4 may see fuller engagement, as trained participants assisting in school tutorial programs or as decision makers on the school planning team.

For the purpose of Standard Bearer Schools, parents may be engaged at all levels, but most importantly at Tier 4, working with the school in making critical decisions about school improvements. Parents bring valuable perspectives to the table as members of the school planning team overseeing Standard Bearer Schools. They understand their children's needs and are aware of the community's perceptions, values, and beliefs. While not usually educators, they bring their years of experience in other professions and aspects of life to the process. Authentic parent involvement is not just documented on paper. It is more than having a seat at the table as mandated by district, state or federal officials. They are doing more than following what the school wishes, they are working cooperatively toward common goals that have been jointly established with determination to move any impediments. Empowered parents feel more ownership in the education of their children, and a greater sense of satisfaction with the school.

Specifically, in Standard Bearer Schools parents at all levels are encouraged to complete the OAS, a Tier 1 activity. Next, parents on the school planning team should be trained and become active in reviewing the results of the OAS and assisting in following the Ten-Step Process along with school personnel to determine specific school issues, their causal factors and the ensuing strategies for correction and improvement. This continues until the planning is complete and a new plan is ready for implementation. Likewise, parents take pride in noting the school's favorable accomplishments and strengths brought out during the analysis and overall planning for the school.

Many opportunities are available for involved parents with important roles such as informing other parents about the school in several ways. They may present in Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings to keep other parents abreast of the status of school planning and other activities at the school. A part of that message is about new initiatives like Standard Bearer Schools and progress on existing ones. Parents also act as community activists, as they spread the word about parent opportunities and participate in campaigns for bonds and levies. Often parents are also part of school teams that represent the school at district training sessions and school board meetings. At an advanced level they may become part of an independent advocacy group to lobby and work for school reform and improvements.

In Standard Bearer Schools, parents help to oversee implementation of the school plan through continued participation on the planning team as well as assuming roles asked of all parents. Some ways to improve parent involvement fall into five broad categories:

- establish parent involvement as a school priority;
- improve the school’s climate so it is more inviting to parents;
- improve communication (written, oral and through social media) with parents;
- take proactive steps to involve parents (“reaching out”);
- provide administrative support for parent involvement.

Further, good schools see parents as assets and follow established patterns to involve parents. Some suggestions to help begin to turn around low parent involvement might be to:

- Think like a community organizer.
- Secure administrator and staff agreement that an all-out effort will be given to improve parent involvement and a plan will be produced. Make this a school priority for all staff and include parent representation on the school team to develop the plan.
- Consider how the school is defining or characterizing parent involvement. What is meant by parent? Sometimes extended family members or a guardian are more available or helpful than a parent, but it may not be clear that they are welcome. Similarly, what is meant by involvement? It starts with activities directly related to their child:
  - Reading with the child
  - Checking and approving the child’s homework
  - Conferencing with the teachers on the child’s progress
  - Limiting TV viewing and video games or other outside activities on school nights
  - Making sure that the child is in school every day
  - Helping children understand why school is important
  - Sharing one’s own expertise and knowledge with the child

And it may mean engaging in activities related more toward the school and district:

- Reading or listening to school communications
  - Responding to communications from the school
  - Linking school work with everyday situations (figuring grocery prices, reading a map)
  - Voting in school board and school level elections
  - Helping improve achievement in the school (tutoring, planning, completing surveys)
  - Chaperoning at special events or on trips
  - Planning constructive out-of-school activities
- Be clear about the school’s expectation of parents. Parents may not know that they are not meeting the school’s expectations of them and their child. Take advantage of various forms of communication including the Internet with consideration of the languages and cultures represented at the school.

- Determine what school staff view as the most critical parent involvement activities and events and communicate them early and repeatedly. Create a calendar of key event dates and share them with parents. Many parents need notice to arrange time off from jobs and difficult schedules. Be certain that these critical activities are well planned and equal to the importance that the school has given them.
- Make parents welcome on campus. Persons at the point of first contact, such as secretaries, security and custodial staff, will benefit from client service training. Rules for responding to phone calls and returning messages, and greeting visitors should be established and followed by all staff, as appropriate. Communications that make the school welcoming to parents in appearance, conversation, and other actions summarize this whole school effort.
- Create opportunities to meet parents at the school as well as on their own turf—in faith-based facilities, in large workplaces, in community-based conference rooms or in libraries.
- Consider establishing a parent center or club and other ideas that may surface in staff or training meetings. Further embrace parents who are in the school for specific purposes such as Booster Clubs.
- Ban the stereotyped thinking that surrounds parents and schools. For example, a lack of parent involvement does not mean that there is not an interest in their child's education. Most parents want a good education for their children and trust the school to provide one. Understand that the school must help parents know that they also have a powerful role to ensure that this happens.
- Train parents to be a part of Standard Bearer Schools.
- Implement the parent involvement aspects of the school plan. This requires the participation of effective school leadership, effective classroom teaching, and supportive parents. Monitor progress and make mid-year corrections as necessary. Share best practices and report progress to all.
- Conduct an evaluation. As the plans for improved parent involvement are implemented and certainly at the end of the school year, much like treatment of performance indicators for success in direct student achievement, the team must look for growth toward goal attainment and check for evidence of the degree of plan success. Lastly, conduct success celebrations.

### *Summary of Parent Involvement*

The research is flooded with information extolling the merits of parental involvement in a child's education. All parents, regardless of economic status, race, culture or language, can contribute to make this a reality. Empowered parents feel more ownership in the education of their children, and a greater sense of satisfaction with the school.

Parents must step up and schools must be welcoming and provide training and support. Parents involved in their child's education not only help the child to achieve more academically and socially, but also lifts staff morale in appreciation of the partnership which has been formed to give the child the best possible educational experience.

A comprehensive school plan inclusive of home/school partnering is the key to beginning this relationship. Parent involvement may or may not become a school action priority on its own for the coming year, but parent involvement needs to be an integral part of the improvement process from the beginning. When families and communities hold low performing schools accountable, school districts make positive changes in resources, policy and practice.

## Implications for Professional Development

The Standard Bearer Schools Guide has been written for an audience of administrators and planning team members, most of whom are assumed to be already somewhat comfortable with, or interested in, data analysis and experienced in school planning. It is based on the experiences of CTAC staff in the school improvement arena, as well as on knowledge of education research and public policy, both of which influence school planning.

In recent years, colleges, districts, and other agencies have provided many opportunities for data-based decision making and for working with software to assist managers in using data for various purposes. Most Standard Bearer Schools' participants find that the connections and processes that turn their school data into student improvement priorities are not only valuable in getting results, but also in extending their own knowledge and skills in this increasingly important arena of data-based decisions. In short, professional development of school staff should begin with an analysis of student data. Studying the data will reveal areas where teachers and administrators themselves need to devote more time.

It is a wise district leader who routinely assesses the skills and knowledge of principals, co-administrators, and teachers and provides professional growth opportunities for data-based school improvement, such as the following:

- Understanding the dynamics of organizations, particularly schools and districts, including culture and change.
- Examining and analyzing school data which, as the Ten-Step Process shows, requires a sound knowledge of the data in use in the school and district, including its limitations and the various ways in which data can be misleading or can be misused.
- Recognizing the key features of planning and implementation, especially how to implement—the hardest, and most neglected, work of school management.
- Thinking both creatively and scientifically about what is going on in the school and understanding the purposes of formal thought in school improvement, including the often overlooked research on adult learning.
- Valuing the viewpoints and participation of parents, students, and community members and building a repertoire of strategies for involving parents, particularly, in all phases of the school, including improvement planning.
- Knowing the school community well but also realizing that communities evolve and change over time, so that methods of communicating with and involving parents must also change.
- Running successful meetings, not just for school planning teams, but for all of the teams and task-oriented groups in the school.

Research demonstrates that adults respond better to active learning that incorporates workshop-based learning but goes beyond passive pedagogies to embrace learning through demonstration, modeling, coaching, and practice.<sup>4</sup> Changing behavior—be it instructional practice or administrative leadership—takes time and requires opportunities to transfer workshop learning into real classroom or school settings. Such professional development acknowledges that changing executive practice means that school improvement planning must include not only time for workshops but job-embedded coaching and practice.

This guide, developed for use in professional development settings in Standard Bearer Schools, is useful for all principals, district instructional leaders, parent and community leaders whose daily tasks are to make schools better. CTAC salutes all of those who participate in the relentless pursuit of the best education for all young people.

## Endnotes

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## Glossary of Educational Terms

The following is a list of terms commonly used when discussing school improvement and their definitions.

*Benchmarks*—interim assessments for judging performance and can be used to determine the progress of students in meeting certain standards. Some schools develop benchmarks to determine what students should know by a particular grade. Many districts develop benchmark tests which are used to determine students' mastery between state-mandated test administrations.

*Causation*—in the context of school improvement planning and root cause analysis, causation refers to something that brings about an effect or result (e.g., car won't start [result]; you're out of gas [cause].) The usage is different from the idea of causation used in scientific terms.

*Demographic data*—information regarding such population descriptors as socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity.

*Descriptors*—words or expressions used instead of numbers to describe or identify characteristics (e.g., below standard, at standard, exceeds standard are descriptors used by districts to describe levels of performance).

*Disaggregate*—to separate a whole into its parts. In education, this term means that test results are sorted into pre-identified groups of students, such as those who are economically disadvantaged or have limited English fluency.

*ESEA Flexibility Waiver*—in order to be waived from certain provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, sometimes referred to by the name of the 2001 reauthorization, No Child Left Behind), states proposed—and received approval from the U.S. Department of Education—to undertake certain reforms, many of which resemble steps taken to compete for Race To The Top funds.

*Formative assessments*—assessments which take place at points in time across a period of time, such as benchmark assessments that teachers use throughout the school year to determine their students' progress in a subject area.

*Hypothesis*—an assumption made in order to draw out and test its logical or empirical consequences.

*Indicators*—measures or statistics (e.g., daily attendance) used as evidence of success in accomplishing an abstract goal, such as student interest in learning.

*Mean*—the arithmetic average, the result obtained by dividing the sum of a set of quantities by the number of quantities in the set.

*Median*—the middle most score or the middle value of a set of values arranged in order of size (i.e., the point at which half of the scores are above and half are below).

*Mode*—the most frequently occurring score.

*Moving Average*—the sum of the most recent data points, divided by the number of points. This tends to reduce the influence of outlying data points when examining data over time.

*Norm*—(1) in education the norm is generally based on the performance of an identified group. This could be the other students in the class, school or district but in the case of norm-referenced measures or tests (i.e., ITBS, SAT10) it refers to that group of students whose scores are used to create the norm. (2) a group expectation for the purpose of facilitation.

*Normal Curve Equivalents (NCE)*—a set of scores that have equal interval units and that have a mean of 50, a standard deviation of 21.06 and a range of 0–99. Unlike percentile ranks which do not have equal intervals, NCEs can be used in mathematical operations.

*Objectives*—specific steps that lead to goal attainment; they identify skills, attitudes and knowledge that must be taught to satisfy the student’s needs and course goals.

*Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS)*—a survey of the organizational effectiveness of a school with respect to: school context and readiness, leadership and improvement planning, curriculum and instruction, teacher effectiveness and evaluation, student responsibility and support, family and school relationships, and district systems of support. The survey is administered to teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, students and parents in a school to assess their perceptions of their school in each of these areas.

*Percentile*—a point on a scale of scores at or below which a given percent of cases fall (i.e., a student whose score is at the 68th percentile can be said to be doing better than 67 percent of the students to whom the student is being compared).

*Percentile Rank*—a number between 0 and 100 indicating the percent of students in a norm group falling at or below that score.

*Proficiency Levels*—categories of performance (usually four or five levels) ranging from below basic or below standards to advanced or exceeds standards, based on a state-mandated test of student performance.

*Race to the Top (RTTT)*—a competitive grant program through the U.S. Department of Education designed to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans for education reform. States compete for funds by changing laws and committing to certain reform priorities; many states changed, or intend to change, the way they collect and use student achievement data, the way teachers or principals are evaluated, and/or the standards upon which state achievement tests are based.

*Stakeholder or constituent*—a person or group of persons who have a reason to care about the quality of the school, often because they are directly impacted, which includes parents, students, community leaders, teachers, school staff, and administrators.

*Standards*—content standards cover what students are to learn in various subject areas, such as mathematics and science. Performance standards specify what levels of learning are expected.

*Student Growth Percentile (SGP)*—A calculation of how much a student has learned in the previous year derived by comparing each student to others who have performed similarly in the past. The final number is the percentage of similar students who had lower scores on the given assessment.

*Summative assessments*—the ending assessment, which in education often refers to the annual spring assessments administered by the district and/or state.

*Variables*—conditions, characteristics, or events that impact an outcome, such as the age or gender of a student (conditions or characteristics), teacher qualifications (characteristics) or professional development (event).

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