Four Keys to Successful School Improvement
Why is it that some schools founder, while others flourish? While it’s true that factors such as resources and demographics play a role, they don’t tell the whole story. You could look at two very similar school systems with comparable budgets and student populations and still find two very different sets of outcomes.

The truth is that remarkable improvement is within reach for any school or district—provided the right strategies are followed.

At School Improvement Network, we’ve spent decades observing school systems and talking with education leaders, and we’ve noticed that K-12 leaders face numerous challenges that keep them from being as effective as they can be. These include trying to pursue too many objectives, constant changes in direction, and poor communication throughout the organization.

These observations are supported by the findings from a two-day summit convened by the Council of Great City Schools with 97 school district chief technology officers a few years ago. When participants were asked, “What are the primary challenges, problems, or areas of volatility you face,” responses included...

- “Creating and disseminating the vision, goals, objectives, and expectations from the top to the bottom.”
- “Multiple visions, objectives, models, systems, ideas, technologies, and agendas all competing for time and resources.”
- “No uniform direction, so we can’t possibly get to a single direction.”

But it doesn’t have to be like this. At School Improvement Network we’ve successfully partnered with school systems around the world to help them realize dramatic improvements in everything from teacher effectiveness to student achievement. Backed by independent research, the results of these efforts speak for themselves.

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In the course of our work, we’ve learned a lot about the science of school improvement. Based on our experience, we’ve developed a powerful, research-based system for achieving school success—one that, when followed, leads to significant gains in student and staff performance.

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These four elements sound simple enough in theory, yet putting them into practice can be quite challenging. Here’s more information about each of these keys to success, along with our recommendations for applying them in your own schools.

### Developing a Plan

Success starts with having a solid plan to guide your improvement efforts. This plan should be based on the needs of your school or district, so you should begin with a comprehensive needs assessment that accurately gauges your strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. Tools that can help you assess your needs include student achievement data, classroom walkthrough information, and surveys of students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Once you have a clear sense of where you are, you can begin to plan for where you want to be. Your plan should include concise, measurable, and achievable goals and objectives that will lead you on a path to success.

For example, suppose your needs assessment determined that some students were struggling because they were bored, frustrated, or overwhelmed with the pace of instruction. You also discovered that many students failed to see the relevance of what they were learning.

To address these problems, you might establish the following goals:

1. Implement more personalized learning to meet every student at an appropriate level of instruction;
2. Connect what students are learning to authentic, real-world tasks; and
3. Use a variety of formative assessment strategies to check students’ understanding before advancing to a new topic.
Here are a few things to keep in mind when developing an effective school improvement plan.

SEEK THE FACTS, AND SPEAK ONLY THE TRUTH

Don’t be afraid to confront hard realities. Sound decision making relies on having a clear picture of the facts. Metaphorically speaking, no ship ever arrived at its destination on time and unscathed when its captain was working with false or incomplete information regarding the weather, the condition of the ship, the ability of its crew, or the distance to be traveled.

In his bestselling book series Good to Great, Great by Choice, and Built to Last, Jim Collins and his research team exhaustively studied the core success principles of the greatest high-growth companies in the country. They found that the organizations that became great, and that sustained their market growth and dominance, infused their entire planning and discussion process with “the brutal facts of reality.” They refused to sugar coat or ignore the facts. They openly and aggressively put everything on the table for unbiased review and examination.

As Collins put it, when you “start with an honest and diligent effort to determine the truth of the situation, the right decisions often become self-evident.”

FOCUS ON ONLY A FEW GOALS AT A TIME.

Limiting your objectives can yield better results, faster. Because time and resources are always limited, the best course of action is to focus on the most important goals that are going to make the largest impact. This point has been echoed by numerous researchers.

Bestselling business and marketing author Al Ries found that, to be successful, organizations need to narrow their focus. “Instead of doing two things subpar, we need to do one thing exceptionally well, and devote our energies to that part of the business that has the best chance of success,” he wrote. Through his case study methodology, he shows the primary reason for small business failure is trying to do too many things at once.

Education scholars have reached the same conclusion. “The common pattern in schools is for leaders to implement multiple new initiatives in an attempt to address a broad range of problems. In trying to solve everything at
once, nothing gets the attention it really needs, and ultimately nothing gets solved,” wrote Trent Kaufman, Emily Grimm, and Allison Miller in their book Collaborative School Improvement.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**

In our own work with school systems, we have seen firsthand the benefits of having a clear plan for success.

In a study published in the Journal of Instructional Psychology, researchers found that schools using Edivate—our professional learning resource—experienced significant growth. But more importantly, the study found that schools establishing a plan for using Edivate saw far greater returns—more than four times the gains in reading and over 10 times the gains in math.

The lesson is clear: When school districts have a solid improvement plan in place, they can realize significant gains in student achievement.

### Articulating a process

A plan by itself is not enough. School districts also must establish a process to carry it out. Think of this process as a roadmap that will guide you to reaching your goals successfully.

This process should address the strategies and tactics you’ll use to execute your plan, as well as the metrics you will apply to measure success. It should assign roles, responsibilities, and timelines for completion: who is responsible for what steps, and when. And it should include frequent classroom observations, followed up with high-quality professional development that is targeted to teachers’ needs.

Here are some things to remember when establishing a school improvement process.

**INVOLVE ALL STAKEHOLDERS**

Research has shown that strategies and processes developed collaboratively as a team become more widely supported and adopted—and that the most effective leaders engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion.

According to Collins, the most successful organizations “create a culture wherein people have a tremendous opportunity to be heard.” He also
observes that in the highest performing organizations, it was not the role of leaders to come up with answers and then motivate everyone to follow their messianic vision. Rather, great leadership “means having the humility to grasp the fact that you do not yet understand enough to have the answers—and then to ask questions that will lead to the best possible insights.”

RESPECT PEOPLE’S TIME

Be sensitive to the fact that some staff members might feel they’re being asked to perform work that goes above and beyond their job responsibilities. As you assign roles and responsibilities, consider how much each staff member can realistically accomplish on top of their current responsibilities.

In his book Leading Change in Your School, Douglas Reeves writes: “The process must be both additive and subtractive. ... Leaders must identify what they can stop doing before asking their colleagues to take on a new change initiative.” Simply adding more objectives without prioritizing or removing existing tasks is not a realistic or sustainable model for success.

BUILD STAFF SUPPORT

It’s not enough to ask your staff for more effort as they work to accomplish objectives. To execute your process successfully, you must help everyone become eager to go above and beyond. This means that all parties must understand exactly what they’ve been assigned, and more importantly, they must see the value in the plan.

Managing a project is a lot like putting together a puzzle, says Rick Borovoy, who is the product manager for Google Play for Education: When there’s a piece we need from someone else, we typically ask for their help by describing the missing piece they are to supply.

But Borovoy suggests an alternate strategy: Instead of focusing on the piece itself, describe the entire picture—and then focus on the hole you’d like them to fill. Leading with your vision for the project, and then explaining how someone fits into this vision, is much more compelling when asking for their help. And convincing others to contribute is essential to project leadership.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

In a study published in the Journal of College Teaching & Learning, researchers discovered that when schools established a sound improvement process, they saw significant gains in student achievement.
The schools involved in the study implemented a process of regular classroom observations, followed up by targeted professional development. The results were remarkable: After only a year of following this process, the schools experienced an average gain of nearly 25% in student proficiency on standardized math and reading exams.

Just as important as establishing a plan and a process is investing in the right technology to support your school improvement efforts.

To achieve real, lasting success, you need a way to support the development of your staff and students with anytime, anywhere access to resources. You also need a way to track and analyze your progress. Technology can help with both of these areas.

**Implementing technology**

An online platform can deliver lesson plans, instructional videos, and other resources to support teacher growth and development on demand. It can help personalize instruction for students, assessing each child’s skills and connecting students with content tailored to their learning needs. It can provide analytics to help you measure progress, assess what is working and what is not, uncover key trends, and make better decisions.

In the past, keeping track of school progress has been a difficult, time-consuming task. But with advances in technology, collecting, analyzing, and sharing data is now automated and instantaneous. District leaders can gather data on teacher and student performance and analyze this information in a variety of iterations in seconds rather than hours, giving them more time to work on achieving their objectives.

When choosing technologies to support your efforts, here are some things to keep in mind.

**THE TECHNOLOGY MUST ALIGN WITH YOUR PLAN AND PROCESS**

It must support your goals and help you achieve them, and it must map well to the process you’ve outlined.

When evaluating technology platforms, make a list of your strategies, tactics, and methods, then compare this list to the technology’s feature set.
any gaps that must be accounted for? If so, are there other systems that would better suit your needs?

**IT MUST BE EASY TO USE**

If the technology is not simple and intuitive, it won’t be used by students or staff. Ideally, it should give all stakeholders a single place to access everything they need, so they don’t have to log in and out of multiple systems.

This is something that Edivate does well: It serves as a one-stop shop for managing the entire school improvement process. For instance, teachers can access their professional growth plan, view their classroom observation results, and get resources to help them attain their goals, all in one location—while administrators can see each teacher’s history of professional learning and how that ties into achievement.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**

A study published in the International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education examined the difference between schools that used Edivate—which can be adapted to support any plan and process easily—and schools that used other forms of professional development. The difference was substantial.

Schools that used Edivate saw an average increase of 18.5% in student proficiency on standardized assessments in just one year. Schools without Edivate had a much harder time improving student achievement, only raising scores by an average of 3.5% in the same period.

Even with everything else in place, successful school improvement is only possible with a strong commitment to long-term implementation of your plan. This can be difficult, but as the research shows, it’s well worth it.

**Ensuring follow-through**

The best plans and intentions of school leaders can unravel quickly without constant focus and communication. You should develop a system of clear, honest, and frequent communication to reinforce your agenda, check for staff understanding, solicit feedback, and request status updates on progress toward objectives—as well as any problems that stand in the way.
And because staff morale is essential to success, you should recognize everyone’s accomplishments, no matter how small. When you’re starting at point A, you’re not going to move to point Z right away. You’re going to move to point B, and then point C, and so on. It’s important to acknowledge these modest milestones along the way.

Here are some other keys to successful follow-through.

STICK TO YOUR PRIORITIES
Effective leadership means knowing how and when to say “no”—and being able to stick to the plan without distraction.

Your priorities are reflected in your actions, not just your words, and nothing causes more consternation than saying one thing and then doing or prioritizing another. It’s not the speeches, the mission statement, or the core values poster that communicate your priorities; it’s what you do day in and day out—and how you focus your time and resources—that become the true values of the organization.

“Too many leaders think that their defining moment for effective change will be their speech to employees, their ‘state of the schools’ address to the community, or their remarks to the board of education,” Douglas Reeves wrote. “But the most important are their thousands of moments of truth when their actions speak louder than words.”

ASSESS, ANALYZE, ADJUST
With your plan under way, it’s important to assess and report your progress at regular intervals. Tracking and reporting teacher and student progress, both individually and collectively, will help you maintain a level of accountability that is critical to seeing your objectives through.

As you assess progress toward your goals, convene leadership teams to look at the data together. What does this information tell you about what is working—and what is not? Use this information to reevaluate your approach and make adjustments as necessary.

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WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

A study published in the Journal of International Education Research tracked the gains in student achievement over time in schools that used Edivate to drive their school improvement plans. The results revealed that schools that followed the four steps outlined in this white paper, used Edivate to support those steps, and then continued to follow through over the long term not only were more successful than other schools, but their gains also increased over time, year after year.

Conclusion

A plan, a process, the right technology to support them, and long-term implementation and follow-through: Together, these elements make up the formula for successful school improvement. It’s an approach grounded in years of research and validated in schools all over the world.

To learn more about Edivate, our School Improvement Formula, and the research that supports it, please visit www.schoolimprovement.com.
Sources


ABOUT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT NETWORK

Founded in 1991 by teachers, School Improvement Network has spent decades researching and documenting the best practices in education. From this research, School Improvement Network has developed Edivate, the new PD 360, a personalized professional learning solution for educators. School Improvement Network works with thousands of schools and districts in every state and around the world and has visited over 3,500 classrooms to document best practices in action.