

ISFIS School Improvement Booster: *Clarifying the Vision*

Our goal at ISFIS is to help you find the intersection of state policy, research, and local school improvement. We hope this newsletter, school improvement Webinars, state policy advocacy, training, and ISFIS school improvement tools will support you to meet your students' needs first, but also help you know confidently that your school actions comply with the law.



Vision and Goal Setting

Vision and goal setting is one of [5 leadership practices](#) identified by the Wallace Foundation as being important for school leadership. It is through this lens that we reviewed the guidance from the Department of Education related to Iowa's new Teacher Leadership and Compensation System (TLCS) Education Reform legislation. Iowa Schools will develop plans for participation in this new system, beginning as early as next school year. The Department suggests in their guidance that schools establish a vision and set goals related to TLCS participation. It's important to revisit your district and building vision and goals and see if they make sense in the context of your current work and what lies ahead. Are they adequate to drive you forward in not just TLCS, but in all the efforts to improve student learning ahead of you?

Seeing Through and Beyond

Consider what Emily Calhoun said in an interview many years ago with Dennis Sparks in this timeless article, [The Singular Power of One Goal](#). "There's a concept I call 'seeing through and beyond,' which means looking at all the changes that will be required. The faculty needs to look through the learning goal to the student performances the teachers want to see; teachers need to consider what successful goal attainment would look like for. Then they need to determine what teacher behaviors in curriculum, instruction, and assessment are necessary to promote those student behaviors. Next, they must see right through the teacher behaviors to what the principal is doing and what the district office is doing. Having the goal helps us focus; then we push through it to the things that everyone must be doing to bring it into reality."

So as we move forward in teacher leadership and compensation and all of the work you are doing to improve outcomes for students, these questions asked at the beginning and throughout the implementation of initiatives will help you visualize and actualize everyone's role and purpose in the improvement effort.

When we have fully implemented this work...

- What will students be doing?
- What will teachers be doing?
- What will principals be doing?
- What will the central office/AEA professionals be doing?
- What will the superintendent be doing?
- What will the school board be doing?
- What will parents be doing?



It is critical to have a concrete plan to accomplish our lofty and important goals. If our concrete actions aren't working very well – yes, monitoring is critical! – we'll need to adjust our actions. Talk gets us only so far. Concrete actions take us to the finish line. Use the questions above to define the concrete actions you'll use to move the system forward.

Example: Seeing Through and Beyond

One common goal in Iowa is that all students are proficient readers or above each year. This goal exists at the Imaginary Community School District (ICSD) where we find Sunshine Elementary School. ICSD has an inclusive goal setting process, but doesn't stop once that process is over. The staff and community meet to flush out details of what is going on in the district in order to meet the goals – they look "through and beyond." They develop a fairly detailed picture, or vision, of what this looks like; a vision that looks far beyond the student achieving a test score that says s/he is proficient at grade level. The vision helps everyone be clear about what's expected and how the work will unfold. What follows is a brief and certainly incomplete illustration of the actions of various role groups at ICSD, specifically in Mr. Smith's 5th grade class at Sunshine, to help them meet their reading goal. Thanks to those friends who reviewed this scenario and offered feedback.

What will students in Mr. Smith's class be doing?

Fifth grade students at Sunshine Elementary School in Mr. Jim Smith's class will be reading quality fiction and non-fiction text – a lot. They will respond to what they read through talking to their friends, Mr. Smith, and their parents about what they are reading. Also they will be writing about what they're reading – answering questions, perhaps some like these:

- How is this character like you and would you have made the same decision? Why or why not?
- How does each of these pieces of writing, the diary and the newspaper article, address the issue?
- Write an opinion paper on the American government's policy to move Native Americans off their land. Take a position and justify it with information you've gathered through our reading materials.

Students won't just read in reading class, but will also have reading integrated into their other classes, so they learn the language and vocabulary of math, science, social studies, and other disciplines. They will read text that is complex and challenging and they will also read text that isn't quite so difficult.

They will watch their teacher, Mr. Smith, think out loud and model for them how he figured out a concept or demonstrate a reading strategy that he, as an experienced and skilled reader, uses. They will work in small groups with other kids and Mr. Smith or another teacher on concepts and skills in which they struggle. They'll engage in formative and benchmark assessments all year long and will analyze the results with Mr. Smith so they know the areas of the curriculum in which they need work. The students will set goals about improving their work and monitor their own progress.

Additionally, students will be reading at home. They'll enjoy reading and see that it brings them information and pleasure which enriches their lives. They'll have access to a multitude of reading materials in Mr. Smith's classroom and they'll visit both the school and public libraries, as well as use the Internet, to gather materials they want to read and through that reading, learn some of what they need to know.

What will the teacher be doing?

Jim will be organizing his classroom and classroom schedule for meeting the Common Core Literacy Standards. Students will have plenty of time and direction to engage in the instruction and activities described in the previous paragraph -

plenty of time and opportunity for reading, writing, and talking about text, and access to reading materials that will make all this possible in a rich classroom library as well as the school library. Jim will be modeling effective reading strategies for his students and monitoring their reading progress both formatively and with benchmark assessments, so he knows in what areas they need help and can provide relevant instruction. He will constantly be building his classroom library so that kids have instant access to high quality fiction and non-fiction text that support the content units in social studies, science, math, art and other disciplines and spur their imaginations.

Jim will be learning a couple of new instructional strategies related to reading comprehension in professional development and will be implementing them in his classroom with students. He fully expects to stumble at first since the strategies are new learning for him, but he also knows that's only temporary. With plenty of practice and the demonstrations he sees in PD and from his colleagues during collaboration time and in their classrooms when he is observing them, he will eventually gain executive control and be able to do the new strategies easily.

Additionally, Jim and his 5th grade teacher colleagues convene regularly scheduled, tightly organized, collaborative meetings twice weekly. Jim and his colleagues will, among other things, scan the reading research which they will use to guide their instructional work, deeply study the Common Core Literacy Standards, plan lessons related to the Common Core Standards, analyze student work, and possibly even help each other out with flexible grouping to address the multiple needs of students in the 5th grade. They will watch each other teach specific lessons and implement new strategies, analyze student work together from the lessons taught and plan the next steps based on student response. The 5th grade team will use the district provided protocol to run their meetings. They will make sure the principal has a copy of each meeting's minutes, so she knows how they're spending time in their collaborative meetings and what kind of support they need. They will welcome the principal, and occasionally the superintendent, central office staff, and AEA personnel, into their collaborative meetings, knowing that these staff members have the ability to help their 5th grade team with their challenges and will celebrate their progress.



Jim and his colleagues will be providing parents with a clear description of their child's reading performance and what the school is doing to support improvement, whether their child is identified as a gifted or challenged reader. Together the 5th grade team will develop a variety of strategies to support students' reading development at home, which they will share with parents in a variety of ways.

What will the principal be doing?

Celia Jones, the principal, establishes a culture of high expectations for both teacher and student learning, using as a foundation the Common Core Literacy Standards. She sees herself as responsible for providing both pressure and support to teachers, so they are constantly improving their instructional practice. If teachers are resistant to improvement, she offers more support. If they don't respond to the offered support from Celia and her colleagues, she helps them assess whether teaching is the right profession for them. Celia deeply understands the reading performance of the students in the building and regularly leads the staff through examination of various data related to the reading performance of students and the instructional implementation of best practices in reading by the staff.

Celia manages the building efficiently, certainly an important part of her job, but she also has scheduled time daily to attend collaborative meetings, be in classrooms, and do other work directly related to improving instruction. Celia knows if she doesn't schedule those important activities and stick to the schedule, her time will be eaten up with management issues like discipline, buses and lunch duties. She delegates to her competent staff and helps them work out effective messages to share with parents or others who believe they need her immediate attention when she is working with teachers and students. She keeps her promise to follow-up on those needs at a later time if others can't resolve their issues. Additionally, she regularly invites the superintendent to accompany her in her instructional work, so he has a better handle on the kind of work going on in the building.

Celia is responsible for establishing the school schedule, prioritizing and protecting time during the school day, twice weekly, for the collaborative teams to meet. Celia attends the collaborative meetings as she can, but also gathers each meeting's minutes and analyzes them, so she can provide support where it is

needed. She realizes the importance of adding new instructional skills to the teachers' repertoire and along with the AEA and central office staff serving her building, she integrates an ongoing professional development initiative into the building improvement work in which she fully participates. She circles back with individual teacher professional development plans to align those with student needs and building and district learning goals, so all efforts are moving in the same direction.

Celia also makes sure classrooms have the reading materials necessary to support the robust literacy initiative. All classrooms must be well stocked with fiction and non-fiction reading materials, so Celia makes sure there is adequate budget related to building those classroom libraries, as well as the school's central library.

What will the central office/AEA staff be doing?

The central office and or AEA personnel assigned to Jim's school, Angie and her colleagues, are crystal clear about the performance of the district and the performance at each school in the district, including Sunshine Elementary where Jim teaches. They are thoroughly versed in the expectations in the Common Core Literacy Standards and use those as the foundation for their work in the schools. Angie facilitates the study of the common core by collaborative teams using the core as the road map for student learning. Angie and her colleagues ensure that the principals have the resources necessary to support instructional improvement and student learning. They meet with Celia regularly, sometimes in a team setting and other times individually, to share research, analyze data, learn about leadership, reading instruction, the Common Core Literacy Standards, and other topics relevant to the principal's role in meeting the school goals. Angie attends collaborative group meetings, sometimes modeling best practice as both the facilitator and a participant. She asks lots of questions and listens to the answers, from both teachers and the administrators, and she uses that data and other information that she collects to drive her professional work with Sunshine.

Angie and her colleagues have developed protocols for the schools to use in collaborative team meetings. These are tightly structured meeting guides so that the focus of the collaborative meetings is on analyzing student work, improving instruction, planning lessons together, and other work that will drive the improvement of student learning. As the collaborative teams use the protocols and offer suggestions for improvement, the central office/AEA staff members

adjust the protocols as needed, keeping in mind what has been determined to be the focus and not straying from the intended purposes.

Angie and her colleagues have a repertoire of research based instructional skills themselves and also access to others with developed instructional repertoires, and they provide leadership in the professional development work of the schools. They work with the principal and school leadership team to build the instructional tool kit of the teachers through the Iowa Professional Development Model, integrating theory, demonstration, practice, and coaching. They don't just come to facilitate the professional development and leave. They work with the Celia, Jim, and other Sunshine Elementary School leaders to provide facilitation and build leadership. Angie and her colleagues are in classrooms observing and teaching lessons and at collaborative meetings to provide demonstrations of the new instruction and follow up coaching (additional demonstrations). Additionally, Angie and her colleagues are very clear about literacy materials available at the central office and AEA libraries and make recommendations for teachers based on the units students are studying in the disciplines.

What will the superintendent be doing?

The superintendent at ICSD, Gus Gustafson, works to see that the principals have the learning and support necessary to improve instruction and student learning in reading, supported by the Common Core Literacy Standards. He is crystal clear about the importance of the role of the building principal in school improvement, and as a result, works to develop principals' skills and protect principal time, so that their energy can be directed at supporting the improvement of instruction. Gus knows that the time teachers are most available to plan instruction and work on improvement are before and after school and at lunch, and he wants the principal available at those times to meet with teachers. He doesn't expect Celia and the other principals to be out front every morning and evening as the busses arrive and leave, supervise lunch every day or be at every activity; he wants principal energy and time preserved for the work that gets results in student learning, the work Celia and her colleagues do with teachers.

Gus meets with the principals regularly, learning in the trenches about leadership support for reading instruction. He is clear about the district's current performance in reading and where the strengths and challenges lie and regularly leads the administrative team through data studies of the annual test and the

benchmarks. Gus asks lots of questions and listens to the answers, from both teachers and the administrative team. He constantly brings the staff back to the mission, vision, and goals, giving them time to reflect on and analyze whether their current work is taking them in a direction that will provide more opportunity and learning for students.

Gus regularly leads the school board through data analysis and communicates progress and challenges with the student learning goals, including reading. He facilitates the school board in their roles of setting goals, monitoring progress, providing the supports necessary to meet the goals, learning together and advocacy. Together Gus and the school board build the budget that addresses the school district's literacy priority with the financial commitment that proves the priority. Included in the budget are resources for the infusion of external expertise related to reading instruction, plenty of money to constantly build classroom book collections as well as building library collections, and other materials relevant to reading and the support of reading.

Gus does many things not many people know about. He asks the local movie theater to show a matinee appropriate for kids on Wednesday afternoons when school is dismissed 1.5 hours early for professional collaboration. He calls the library, warning them that school will be out early and the school has encouraged kids to use the library, so they can staff up on Wednesdays if they need to. He works with local child care providers to make sure kids have transportation to and from preschool and to and from school. He works with communications experts to explain in newsletters to parents and community members why professional development time is essential for improving teaching and helping students succeed in the long run.

What will the parents be doing?

While the school can't dictate what parents do, the school can certainly let parents know in a supportive and kind way what home supports will help children become better readers. In no way, however, should less than fully engaged parents be used as an excuse for poor student learning. Catherine Snow of Harvard in her landmark 1991 study showed that high classroom support can overcome poor home support in developing readers. We have shared a limited scenario for your consideration.

Parents support their children in a variety of ways, since they have various resources and time. Most want to learn about their child's reading performance, so they can work to support their child in reading at home. It wouldn't be surprising for parents to need a bit of help in knowing how to do that, so the school provides a list of the many ways parents can support their students in reading; reading to and with their children, talking to them about books, modeling their own reading, taking them to the library, reading recipes as they cook together, playing car games as they drive together- seeking out letters, numbers, words, etc., ensuring their child goes to bed early, eats nutritious meals, has limited TV time, and other recommendations the school shares. These ideas are presented in multiple formats (on the school website, in written form, on Facebook, etc.), so parents have access in the way that works for them. Some parents attend special evening meetings, complete with school provided childcare, where parents see models and demonstrations from experts on how to interact with their children regarding books. Additionally, kids bring books home from school that parents and kids can read together.

What will the school board be doing?

With the support and in partnership with the school staff, the school board will set expectations, hold the system accountable, learn together about reading and what makes up a good reading program through a study of the Common Core Literacy Standards, and advocate locally and at the state and federal levels for the resources they need to meet their goals. The board will be regularly informed about where students are performing through test data and will set goals in cooperation with the staff based on the current performance. The board will have regular learning experiences about what is happening in classrooms related to their goals and they will receive regular updates on implementation of their reading program, along with regular updates on student performance from regularly scheduled benchmarks. The board will communicate progress and challenges with student learning at the board table and in the community and will champion and protect professional development time for educators to improve instruction.



As mentioned earlier, the board will work with the superintendent to provide financial resources to support their literacy initiative.

In Conclusion...

While this scenario is incomplete and you may look at it differently, we believe that an exercise in building this kind of vision will help everyone in your school more clearly see their part in ensuring students learn well. In this case it was about reading, but all of your goals can be flushed out to make the expectations clearer for everyone.

WHAT'S POSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE?

As you set goals, it's important to look at what's possible. Often we are limited by our own experiences, so bringing in the experience of others often proves to be enlightening and motivating. We have included a short description of three schools, about which Karen Chenoweth wrote in her 2007 book [*It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools*](#). Ms. Chenoweth will be speaking at this year's [SAI Conference](#), so we offer you a preview of her work.

Frankford Elementary School, Delaware

At the time of the writing of *It's Being Done*, [Frankford Elementary School](#) had challenging demographics (and still does). 36% of the students were African American, 28% Latino, and 36% White. Over 20% were identified for special education and 75% received free or reduced price meals. Frankford is close to the Atlantic Shore and serves a rural population. Many of the parents are recent Mexican immigrants with little education themselves; they work in food processing or in service jobs at the nearby resort of Bethany Beach. In 1997 Sharon Brittingham came to Frankford as a new principal, facing a legal review by the Office of Civil Rights, very low achievement, and a staff that didn't think it was possible, given the demographics of the school, for students to achieve more than they were achieving. But with Sharon's commitment to using data, a "tough minded" commitment to all children learning, and an individualized plan for every student, by 2003, 97.5% of Frankford's 5th graders met the Delaware Reading Standard, including 100% of the African American students, previously the lowest achieving demographic group. In 2007 Frankford Elementary was a USDE Blue Ribbon School. Sharon Brittingham notes, "If you take all these excuses that kids come from poor homes or speak Spanish, then you don't get anywhere. You raise the bar for the adults, and then you raise the bar for the children."

University Park Campus School, Worcester, Massachusetts

[University Park](#) is a 7th through 12th grade school in an old and poor neighborhood near Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Clark officials were concerned no one would be willing to send their college-aged children to Clark if the rundown neighborhood continued to decline. “It was a matter of enlightened self-interest,” said Thomas Del Prete, director of the Jacob Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark University. “Clark realized that its own future was at stake.” The leaders at Clark knew that for a neighborhood to revitalize, the public schools had to be first-rate, so it set about creating first class neighborhood schools. Clark promised that any student who lived within 8 blocks and qualified would be allowed to attend Clark for free. Additionally, University Park was designated as a professional development school, where high school teachers participated in professional development, were mentored, and could take graduate classes for free. At the time of the writing of *It’s Being Done*, 70% of the children attending University Park received free or reduced meals and 78% spoke English as a second language. Most students entered the school at least two grade levels behind. With a tight focus on a narrowed curriculum (very few electives), effective instruction, and strong personal support, all students passed the high school exit exam with 83% proficient or advanced in English and 86% proficient or advanced in math. 100% of University Park’s graduates attend college.

Elmont Junior/Senior High School, Long Island New York

When Karin Chenoweth visited [Elmont Jr/Sr High School](#), she said she felt like she had found the “Holy Grail” of education. This school did everything they could to ensure all kids learned well including a laser focus on instructional excellence, encouragement for all students to participate in extra-curricular activities of some sort, and the acknowledgement that students have issues outside of school with which they may need help and the school must find ways to address those issues. Chenoweth said the instruction was excellent and that she learned something new in every class she visited. The principal Al Harper was 100% committed to all children learning well and saw education as a pathway to future success. He said, “If you have good teachers doing good, exciting instruction, kids will learn...” (If a teacher doesn’t believe all children can learn) “He should be in a different business. He should work for IBM or another big company. He shouldn’t be a teacher.” At the time of the writing of *It’s Being Done*, this school graduated 99%

of its students with 89% of them receiving Regents' Diplomas, which are considered advanced diplomas in New York.

APPS and WEBSITES

Remind101

This app, [Remind101](#), is a way for teachers, students, and parents to communicate via text messaging without exchanging cell phone numbers.

Animoto

This free app turns photos into professional-quality videos, complete with music and text. Choose photos, video clips, music, and video style. Users can easily share their creations.



The Smithsonian has many educational, fun on-line apps and websites for learning. This particular one, [Digging for Answers](#), tests expertise, but more importantly research skills.



[Lit Pick](#) receives courtesy copies of the latest young adult titles from publishers and authors. These review copies are made available to our student reviewers. Our young adult student reviewers provide us with their opinions on these titles in book reviews which are posted on the website, forming a lively and engaged online community with benefits for all stakeholders.

QUOTES

This month's quotes are drawn from Karin Chenoweth's, [*It's Being Done*](#). These are just a few of the things "getting it done" schools do that are different from schools that aren't "getting it done." More are listed in her publication.

They (the schools featured in the book) know what the stakes are. "They know that if their students don't get a good education, they face the probability of a lifetime of poverty and dependence. 'We have got to expand [our students' horizons or we are still signing their death warrants,' principal coach Martha Barber tells principals she works with in Alabama. And many of them are quite open about sharing this understanding with students. 'This is your one chance,' principal Richard Esparza tells his students at Granger HS in rural Washington."

They make decisions on what is good for kids, not what is good for adults. "In 'It's Being Done' schools, student needs, not adult needs, drive decision making... When decisions are made consistently and backed up with solid reasons and compelling data, good teachers embrace this kind of decision making."

Principals are a constant presence. "Although, like all principals, they are called out for meetings... for the most part, the principals are in the building and walking the halls, conferring with teachers, looking at student work, and interacting with students, teachers, and parents."

They are nice places to work. "Mind you the schools are not easy places to work. 'We work really hard,' is the most common thing teachers in these schools say. 'It's Being Done' schools have high and constantly rising expectations for teachers, who are expected to learn more every year to constantly improve their skills and knowledge, and to work collaboratively with their fellow teachers. They also have students whose lives outside of school sometimes break their teachers' hearts. But because their work is organized in a way that allows teachers to be successful and take leadership roles, and because the atmosphere in these schools is one of respect, they are nice places to work."