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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT BOOSTER
Pressure and Support

An e-newsletter provided by Iowa School Finance Information Services (ISFIS)

There is pressure for public education to achieve better outcomes for American students. With the advent of No Child Left Behind and testing that exposed the public to our challenges, we are well into a new age of accountability from the federal, state, and local levels. The feds have again proposed changes to NCLB which, if they become law, will continue testing and accountability provisions. If they don't pass, we will continue testing and accountability. So it looks like testing and accountability are here to stay.

Seeing test scores in the newspaper, on television and even at the doctor's office in the Annual Progress Report prompts parents to ask more questions about student performance than ever before. Statewide, we have begun implementing a process of ranking attendance centers required by the education reform legislation of 2013. The Iowa Department of Education notes,

> "An Attendance Center Ranking (ACR) system must be built on a framework that combines accountability and improvement to be successful. Each year, schools and districts across Iowa use accountability metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies and practices. The results of these measures can highlight areas of success as well as pinpoint opportunities where improvement must be made. This annual process should be embedded in district and building planning. While local planning processes have existed for several years, they have not necessarily been data-based, and it is clear that they need to be revised to focus on increasing student achievement. The ACR legislation provides an opportunity for the Department, Iowa Area Education Agencies (AEAs), districts and buildings to collectively align accountability metrics within a focused improvement framework. In turn, ACR metrics will be built into annual progress reports and accountability plans to monitor progress and inform the supports the Department can provide."

The legislation specifies:

> "The department shall develop an achievement score that calculates aggregate growth as well as aggregate proficiency of students which when combined with other academic indicators results in an overall school performance grade for each attendance center in the school district. The performance grade may also be used as one measure to rank and classify schools into six different performance categories: exceptional, high performing, commendable, acceptable, needs improvement, and priority."

The Department of Education has released their initial depiction of two categories for the Attendance Center Rankings found here.

Another Iowa law stipulates that third graders could be retained if they don't read on grade level and don't meet the requirements set out in the law. The Department of Education website provides this information:

Iowa Code section 279.68 and 281--Iowa Administrative Code 62 (you can find the text of this act by going here and then searching for 281.62 n the Iowa Administrative Code search box) promote effective evidence-based programming, instruction and assessment practices across schools to support all students to become proficient readers by the end of the third grade. General requirements of Iowa Code section 279.68 and 281.62 are listed below. All requirements go into effect immediately and are expected to be implemented no later than August 1, 2014 unless otherwise indicated.

- Provision of universal screening in reading for K-3 students
- Progress monitoring for students who exhibit a substantial deficiency in reading
- Provision of intensive instruction – including 90 minutes daily of scientific, research-based reading instruction - for students who exhibit a substantial deficiency in reading
- Notice to parents that a student exhibits a substantial deficiency in reading, including strategies the parents can use at home to help the child succeed
- Notice to parents of such a student's subsequent progress
- Provision of an evidence-based summer reading program for students who exhibit a substantial deficiency in reading (Effective May 1, 2017)
- Retention of any student who is not proficient in reading by the end of the third grade, did not attend the summer reading program, and does not qualify for a good cause exemption from the retention requirement (Effective May 1, 2017)

Student outcomes are being scrutinized more than ever before.

People we talk to in Iowa schools want to achieve the expected outcomes noted above - making sure all kids learn well and make robust gains. Many we talk to in schools express anxiety with all they are expected to accomplish during a time of fewer resources as state aid doesn't keep pace with district needs, therefore limiting the technical assistance they need to improve. Some are feeling outright overwhelmed. There are many actions that must occur in order for schools to improve, not the least of which is a balanced delivery of pressure and support. Both are necessary to create the right culture for school improvement. Prior to No Child Left Behind there was little pressure. With the advent of that law there seems to be plenty. It's important that the corresponding support necessary to achieve the goals set out in the law, in addition to those we also set for ourselves, provides the capacity necessary for the system to deliver what we and everyone wants for Iowa's children.

Richard Elmore, Harvard Professor, writes frequently about pressure and support which he calls reciprocity of accountability and capacity:

"The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity: If the formal authority of my role requires that I hold you accountable for some action or outcome, then I have an equal and complementary responsibility to assure that you have the capacity to do what I am asking you to do. (Elmore 1997) … The chief administrative leaders—superintendents and principals—are accountable for using these resources and authority to guide improvement. Both types of leaders are responsible for explicitly modeling in their own behavior the learning they expect of others. And leaders of practice—teachers and professional developers—are accountable for developing the new knowledge and skill required for the demands of broad-scale improvement. Distributed leadership makes the reciprocal nature of these accountability relationships explicit. My authority to require you to do something you might not otherwise do depends on my capacity to create the opportunity for you to learn how to do it, and to educate me on the process of learning how to do it, so that I become better at enabling you to do it the next time."

Source: Richard Elmore, Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Harvard Graduate School of Education. Winter 2000. *Building a New Structure of School Leadership*. The Albert Shanker Institute. Page 22 of 42.

So what does this mean in regular language? This quote clarifies the relationship between pressure and support. If a school or a person is required to do something they don't know how to do, then there is an obligation on the part of the entity or person requiring the outcome to provide the support necessary to do what is being expected. Everyone at all levels must participate and be agreeable to learning and participation in the improvement effort. Iowa's new Teacher Leadership and Compensation System provides a great lens through which to observe this relationship as it relates to Elmore's reciprocity of accountability.

"Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can accomplish."
Sam Walton

State government has provided legislation (support) and funds (support) for the deployment of teacher leaders through the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System. In return, state government expects improved academic outcomes for Iowa students (pressure). School district leadership teams have developed and submitted plans (support) to access the funds the Legislature has appropriated (support). Once the funding is received, plans must be implemented (pressure and support). Schools must expect everyone to participate and improve instruction (pressure) and as a result, student learning will improve. In order for those improvements to be made, the district will hire teacher leaders/coaches with significant instructional expertise (support) to model effective instruction, help teachers plan lessons, organize data for analysis, gather materials, and other important tasks related to school improvement (support). Teacher leaders will have additional pay (support), but be expected to carry out the actions described above for their colleagues (pressure) and teachers will have access to instructional expertise (support) and use that expertise to improve their own instructional delivery (pressure). Students will be held to high expectations (pressure), but teachers will provide a variety of instructional practices and programs that ensure students have the support they need to be successful (support for students, pressure for schools). As you can see from this example, pressure and support go hand-in-hand.

When everyone in the school district agrees on the goals that emanate from the data, understands the support it will take to reach those goals, and then figures out how to put all of the pieces in place, real improvement can occur. We know of a school faculty in the midst of a reading initiative that wanted to move faster in their work to improve outcomes for kids. They had learned together in professional development that they had to change instruction to reach everyone and they had specific instructional strategies that they all had learned and were expected to implement. Their reading assessments indicated that different students needed work on different skills and concepts. They had problem solved in their collaborative teams together and determined they needed time for small flexible groups to address the different learning needs of their students. So as a group committed to improved instruction, they figured out a way to have those small flexible groups meet each day in addition to the core instructional time. This took significant planning and support by their teams and their principal and support from the central office to use their personnel in different ways. But everyone was flexible and all ideas were considered. As a result of their commitment to adult learning, their laser focus on student learning, and the flexibility and support implemented at all levels from the school board, superintendent, principal, all teachers – not just reading teachers – and paraprofessionals, they moved achievement significantly.

CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPROVED SCHOOL DISTRICTS

In 2004 the state of Washington gathered data from schools where school improvement projects had resulted in improved student learning. They found the following:

Pressure: High Expectations and Accountability for Adults
"Improved districts hold all adults in the system accountable for student learning, beginning with the superintendent, senior staff, and principals. The districts have clear expectations for instruction and apply consistent pressure on schools for improved outcomes for students. The superintendent expects excellence by all, monitors performance, and provides feedback. High expectations influence hiring decisions and prompt districts and schools to address issues regarding ineffective teachers."

Support: Coordinated and Embedded Professional Development
"Improved districts are providers or brokers of high quality professional development programs that are intensive, ongoing, focused on classroom practice, and include onsite coaching. Districts focus their support for professional development based on the teaching and learning needs of the school. Professional learning communities are developed and supported to build teacher knowledge and skills and to change instruction across the system. Central offices also develop as professional learning communities."

Read more about the pressure and support found in this research here.

THE SIX SECRETS OF CHANGE

Michael Fullan assumes change must occur and more students must learn well (pressure). Given this assumption, he provides six secrets of change – supports that he suggests will make the change possible.

Secret 1: Love your employees. "Explore the importance of building the school by focusing on both the teachers and staff, and students and the community. The key is enabling staff to learn continuously."

Secret 2: Connect peers with purpose. "Purposeful peer interaction within the school is crucial. Student learning and achievement increase substantially when teachers work in learning communities supported by school leaders who focus on improvement."

Secret 3: Capacity building prevails. "The most effective strategies involve helping teachers and principals develop the instructional and management of change skills necessary for school improvement. The role of assessment for learning is essential in order to link data on learning to instructional practices that achieve student results."

Secret 4: Learning is the work. "Professional development (PD) in workshops and courses is only an input to continuous learning and precision in teaching. Successful growth itself is accomplished when the culture of the school supports day-to-day learning of teachers engaged in improving what they do in the classroom and school."

Secret 5: Transparency rules. "Ongoing data and access to seeing effective practices is necessary for success. It takes up the dilemmas of 'de-privatizing practice' in which it becomes normal and desirable for teachers to observe and be observed in teaching facilitated by coaches and mentors."

Secret 6: Systems learn. "Continuous learning depends on developing many leaders in the school in order to enhance continuity. It also depends on schools being confident in the face of complexity, and open to new ideas."

This Fullan article includes many wonderful examples from business and schools related to these ideas. Read the whole article here.

BALANCING DIRECTION AND SUPPORT

"…(This) chronicle(s) California's Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District's efforts from 2006-07 to balance support with direction (pressure) – what some might call carrots and sticks – with continued emphasis on rich opportunities for professional learning (support) and increased accountability (direction). Our analysis suggests that maintaining a balance between the two and reducing variability at the school and classroom levels of the system are central tasks for maintaining the reform momentum." In a nutshell, they found that educators at all levels including teachers and district leaders – central office and principals, had to all be involved in the pressure and support efforts.
   • Developing procedures and policies to ensure professional accountability
   • Maintaining and extending opportunities for professional learning
   • Making progress implementing the literacy initiative
   • Confronting the challenges

Read about this district's effort to address the issues of pressure and support here.

Learning Experiences in School Renewal

Bruce Joyce and Emily Calhoun share information about school renewal programs that resulted in improved student outcomes. Four of the five programs used what we call in Iowa the "Iowa Professional Development Model" which includes the elements of theory, demonstration, practice and coaching. They don't offer this paper as THE answer, but rather as a contribution to the ongoing study of what supports are necessary for schools to improve. "The five programs we describe share three characteristics: the primary focus was improving student learning; the major school improvement strategy was an investment in people; and each program was designed and conducted as a learning experience to generate knowledge about important aspects of school renewal and staff development. In four of the cases, initiatives were made to directly influence the learning of children, and implementation and effects on student learning were studied. In the fifth case, a strenuous effort was made to turn schools into self-renewing organizations through shared governance and action research, and the effects were studied in terms of changes in the professional community of 60 schools, the initiatives they generated, and their effects on students." Among their many conclusions were these.

1. Many schools stall when they have inadequate technical assistance. In other words, it's often necessary to bring experts from the outside in to help with school improvement efforts. This technical assistance is not a one-shot workshop, but rather ongoing support.
2. School improvement efforts need leaders at all levels. When the leadership is centered in just a couple of people it can work, but it's much easier when there are leaders at every level of the system. These leaders have a full voice in the decision making, but they make decisions based on what works and other data and information, not on what "feels right" or what their personal preferences are.
3. Gender, poverty, race, and other factors that have previously determined learning success can be minimalized if the new instruction that is being learned has a track record of working across populations of students. In other words, it's on the adults to implement instruction that works for all students.

Lead Team Discussion

1. What is your improvement focus? Can everyone in the school describe the focus area(s) clearly? How do you know?
2. What are you doing to improve in your focus area(s)? Can everyone in the school describe the actions you're taking to improve? How do you know?
3. Are you studying implementation and student response to the new instruction, so you know where you need to go next as you elevate teacher and student learning? How? Is your process clearly defined?
4. Do you have a leadership team composed of people from all levels of the system – the central office, building principals, and teachers? Who are they? Besides these formal leaders who else is exhibiting leadership? How are you acknowledging everyone's contributions? Does everyone have a full voice?
5. Can people in your school opt out of the improvement effort? If so, why? Do you have a plan to bring them in? What is it?
6. Do staff members feel supported as they work through the improvement effort? Do you regularly ask them what they need?

Skills Iowa Corner

Several educators have expressed concerns about the difficulty of one or two of the benchmarks. Like the Iowa Assessments, the Skills Iowa benchmarks range in difficulty from pretty easy for most at that grade level to quite challenging for even the best readers or mathematicians. Thousands of Iowa students take these benchmarks, so it is not surprising that there are occasional questions. We welcome them. It means you all are looking at the data which is great! The goal of the benchmark assessments is to provide information to principals and teachers so they can plan instruction related to the skills and concepts students need to know and be able to do. The benchmarks are not designed to be summative in nature and are meant to be low stakes - learning tools for both educators and students. Please read the benchmark test before your students take it. If you anticipate the benchmark may be difficult for them, you might suggest to your students that they're going to have to read (or do the math) carefully and thoughtfully because this will be a challenging and important assessment to show you what they know. Let them know these assessments are designed to help you know what they need to learn before school is over for the year and their help is appreciated.

QUOTES

"Behaviors change before beliefs."
   Many Experts (Michael Fullan, Bruce Joyce, etc.)

"Pressure is something you feel when you don't know what the hell you're doing."
   Peyton Manning

"The objective is not to identify whom to blame for a problem, it is to find out where the system failed."
   Liker & Meier, 2007

"School capacity includes and requires:
   1. Knowledge, skills, dispositions of individuals
   2. Professional community
   3. Program coherence
   4. Technical resources
   5. Shared leadership"
      Newmann, King, & Youngs

"I have a principle that I think is pretty robust and pretty important: the 'principle of the reciprocity of accountability for capacity.' That is, at every level of the system when I ask you for an additional unit of performance – when I ask a principal to engage in a different kind of practice and to be accountable for engaging that practice, or if a principal asks a teacher to engage in a certain kind of practice, or a teacher asks a student to do so – I have by virtue of having asked for that additional unit of performance, an equal and opposite responsibility to provide the capacity to acquire the knowledge and skill to do that performance."
   Richard Elmore, "Building Capacity to Enhance Learning," A*ssociation of Secondary School Principals*, January 2002.

"Shared vision or ownership is more of an outcome of a quality process than it is a precondition."
   Michael Fullan

"Pressure is a word that is misused in our vocabulary. When you start thinking of pressure, it's because you've started to think of failure."
   Tommy Lasorda

If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics, please contact Susie Olesen at susie.olesen@isfis.net.

Iowa School Finance Information Services | 1201 63rd Street | Des Moines, IA 50311 | www.isfis.net