



# School Improvement Booster

An e-newsletter provided by

Iowa School Finance Information Services (ISFIS)

October 2012: Managing People, Data and Processes

Keith Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, and Kyla Wahlstrom, supported by the Wallace Foundation, produced two landmark studies about school leadership, the first in 2004, [How Leadership Influences Student Learning](#) and a second in 2010, [Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning](#). In the second study they write, "In developing a starting point for this six-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary view of the research, *that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. After six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim.*" In other words, SCHOOL LEADERS MATTER.

Just this year, 2012, the Wallace Foundation released the first in a series of reports called The Wallace Perspective in which they looked at their work in leadership and identified five leadership practices that they find as central to effective school leadership.

1. Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;
2. Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;
3. Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
4. Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
5. **Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.**

This issue is focused on **managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement** (*The Wallace Perspective, 2012*). Schools must constantly use data and be organized for success if they are to reach challenging goals, and this issue focuses on those processes.

We have organized these (and will do so with future newsletters) with the hope you are able to use them to learn together with a leadership team of administrators and/or teacher leaders. Issues of the School Improvement Booster are posted on the [ISFIS site](#) (password protected for ISFIS subscribing districts) or on the [Skills Iowa site](#) (accessible to all).

## Leadership Practices from the Wallace Foundation

This is the last of the newsletter series of leadership practices identified by the Wallace Foundation. If there are issues with which your school improvement team is wrestling, let us know, so we can target future issues of the School Improvement Booster to meet your needs.

## Announcement! New Class Offered for Graduate and Recertification Credit: Skills Iowa Looks at Student Work

Join us for *Skills Iowa Looks at Student Work*, a graduate and/or license renewal class in assessment, targeted at school teams including principals, teacher leaders, superintendents - all those interested in student learning. We hope Skills Iowa schools (or others also interested in digging deeper into student work), will view this as a chance to understand more about how well their own (*cont'd on Page 2*)

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students are learning and what they can do to move that learning forward. Participants will take away these processes, resources, and ideas:

1. Procedures for using Skills Iowa data (or other benchmark data) as an entry to a deeper look at student learning through the process of Looking at Student Work, leading to instruction that challenges, motivates, and engages students in meaningful work.
2. A plan for using a variety of assessments to move learning forward in your school, including Skills Iowa (or other benchmark data) and valid and reliable performance assessments developed for your own students.
3. A process, as well as tools and resources, for the regular and important practice of Looking at Student Work during collaboration time, an ongoing element of successful collaborative teamwork focused on the outcome of meeting student learning needs.
4. Connections to and support from other school leaders and your own staff as you experience studying Skills Iowa benchmarks and Looking at Student Work together.

This class is intended for school teams, superintendents, principals, and/or teacher leaders. We can enroll a maximum of 20 people, so register now!

The instructors for this class will be Susan Westlund, who has worked extensively in performance assessment, most recently through the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston, and Susie Olesen, Director of Skills Iowa at ISFIS.

More about this class can be found at the [AEA Professional Development site](#) and then search for *Skills Iowa Looks at Student Work*. If you have any questions email or call Susie for more information as well: [Susie@skillsiowa.org](mailto:Susie@skillsiowa.org) or 641-745-5284.

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## Comments Antithetical to High Performing Schools

We occasionally hear comments when talking to school leaders that are antithetical to those heard in high-performing schools that manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement:

- “I’m brand new and I want to just listen and watch for a year before I do anything.”
- “She may not be willing to collaborate, but she’s a great teacher so I’m just going to leave her alone.”
- “The teachers here can lead themselves. I just let them go.”
- “I know more time should be built into the schedule for collaboration, but we don’t have the resources, so we’ll just have to fit it in when we’re able.”
- “The community knows they’re welcome here and votes for our levies. We already HAVE a supportive community.”
- “I don’t care what the data say, I know this student.”
- “I saw a good collaboration session yesterday and they’re probably all like that.”
- “I’m not sure exactly what goes on in the collaboration sessions, but I know the teachers appreciate the time they have together.”
- “We’ve tried everything. These kids just don’t learn.”
- “Teachers here care about kids, and I’m pretty confident the collaboration we’re implementing will make a difference.”

Do conversations in your building or district sound like those just mentioned? Or have you progressed to an elevated state of school improvement that focuses on data, managing people and processes in systematic ways? Check out the other side of the story.

## Using Data

Managing people and processes is supported and enriched through the use of data. Two kinds of data are critical to school improvement work: data focused on students and data focused on adults. Both should be used to improve outcomes for students. The Iowa Department of Education provides [information about assessment specific to Iowa](#). There is so much data that can be collected for students, including diagnostic data (reading inventories, surveys, etc.), formative data used to guide instruction (student writing samples, projects, homework, unit tests, benchmarks, etc.), and summative data for evaluation (the Iowa Assessments, surveys, end of course tests, etc.). ISFIS provides a web-based program in Skills Iowa that offers an ongoing look at student learning through teacher made assessments, benchmarks, and web-based tutorials in reading comprehension and math. If you are interested in learning more about it, please feel free to email or call Susie at [Susie@skillsiowa.org](mailto:Susie@skillsiowa.org) or 641-745-5284.

Historically schools haven't collected much data on the actions of adults. This data helps us understand the effectiveness of interventions on student learning. For example, we may have had a professional development effort focused on improving reading comprehension. Everyone attends the professional development sessions, but the resulting student learning is uneven. Some classes of students improve in reading comprehension; others do not. Attending the professional development isn't enough; the new practices learned in the PD sessions must be implemented into classroom practice regularly and with fidelity to impact student learning. Measuring the implementation of the new strategies into classroom practice is critical if we're to measure the success of an initiative. Monitoring adult actions is a critical piece of managing people and processes.

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## Managing People and Processes Supported by Data

In Education Research News, research on stagnating and improving schools is shared. "In Organizing Schools, researchers identified 100 elementary schools that had substantially improved and 100 that stagnated during the decade after decentralization reforms in Chicago Public Schools. They analyzed 15 years of data from a range of sources—school performance, student and teacher surveys, census, crimes, public housing, child protective services—to understand what the successful schools did to accelerate student learning and under what conditions. (Anthony) Bryk described the five "essential supports" for improvement:

- strong school leadership,
- professional capacity and collaboration among faculty and staff,
- a student-centered learning climate,
- a culture that welcomes parent and community ties, and
- strong instructional guidance and materials.

"Bryk compared the essential supports to a recipe for baking a cake: Without the right ingredients, the effort falls apart." [Organizing Schools for Improvement](#) is a chronicle of this work.

All of these supports are related to managing people and processes. Based on this study, here are some questions leadership teams should ask themselves to determine if they're managing people and processes for success. Each question is followed by a suggestion on how it might be measured (in parentheses). Every single question should be followed by "How do you know?" That will help you determine how to measure what you expect to see. With practice, your team will come up with easier and better measurements than we list. This isn't a comprehensive list – just a few suggestions. We suggest you pick an area of focus to get started.

### Strong school leadership

- What am I doing individually as a school leader and part of a team of school leaders to improve this school, whether I'm a teacher or administrator? (Do a time audit. It doesn't have to be fancy. Just write down what you do and how long it takes you for a week. Then analyze your data to see how you're spending your time.)
- In what areas do I mainly focus my leadership (curriculum, instruction, assessment, parent relationships, extra-curriculars, behavior, etc.)? (time audit)

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- Does each school have a leadership team primarily focused on teaching and learning? Are they working well?
  1. We have a leadership team focused on teaching and learning - Yes or No.
  2. Write down the topics and the time spent covering them from attending several meetings.
  3. Survey the team members to see how they think it is going.
  4. Have a conversation about progress. Ask members to write and share what is working, what isn't, and suggestions for improvement.

### **Professional capacity and collaboration among faculty and staff**

- Is our school schedule organized for collaboration? (Analyze the schedule. Does everyone have time during the day at least once weekly to collaborate with colleagues?)
- If we have scheduled collaboration time, how are staff members using the time?
  1. Collect and analyze meeting notes.
  2. Visit the meetings and collect data on how the time is used.
- Is time spent during these collaborative sessions doing activities that will move our district and schools forward . . . activities like analyzing student work, planning lessons, rehearsing new instructional strategies, etc.? Is there enough of the most critical activity to improve achievement?
  1. Collect and analyze meeting notes.
  2. Visit the meetings and collect data on how the time is used.
- Is our staff learning new instructional skills through the implementation of the Iowa Professional Development Model?
  1. Identify your school's instructional initiative. Analyze the IPDM process and compare it to your own PD processes.
  2. Collect implementation logs.
  3. Do walk-throughs looking specifically for the new instruction.

### **A student centered learning climate**

- Are students actively engaged in learning or are they mainly passive? (Observe in classrooms, and be sure to collect data that tells you what the teacher is doing and what the students are doing.)
- How do students work together to tackle the curriculum? (Observe in classrooms, and be sure to collect data that tells you what the teacher is doing and what the students are doing.)
- How do students share ideas and reflect on what is being learned? (Observe in classrooms, and be sure to collect data that tells you what the teacher is doing and what the students are doing.)

### **A culture that welcomes parents and community ties**

- Do parents and the community feel welcomed in our school?
  1. Survey the parents at conferences or put up a survey on your website for the community members to fill out.
  2. Track the number and purpose of parent visits.
- What is our strategy in this school and district for parent/community engagement? Here is a good publication that will spark ideas on this topic: [Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform](#)

### **Strong instructional guidance and materials**

- Do we have instructional and curricular expectations for every teacher? Have they been developed collaboratively and communicated to the staff? How do we know?
- Are they being implemented?
  1. Observe in classrooms, and be sure to collect data that tells you what the teacher is doing and what the students are doing.
  2. Collect implementation logs.
  3. Analyze student learning results.

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While collecting data in these areas may seem overwhelming, don't do everything at once. First, collect the data. Then analyze it with your team. Groups who omit the second step, leaving the data in a binder on the shelf, waste a lot of precious time and golden information. Once you've analyzed it, look for what instructional changes must happen. Your next data collection and analysis experience will most likely paint a more positive picture. Knowing what you expect to be happening is actually happening is critical to school success. Develop a plan to study those things that most need your attention and most impact student learning. Then implement it. Do it again. This cycle of assess, analyze, and act will serve you and the students in your school district well.

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## Quotes

“The lure of the distant and the difficult is deceptive. The great opportunity is where you are.” - John Burroughs

“If people only knew how hard I work to gain my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful at all.” - Michelangelo

“If you don't know where you are headed, you'll probably end up someplace else.” - Douglas J. Eder, Ph.D

“The most important thing about assessment is that it promotes dialogue among faculty.” - Mary Senter

“The important question is not how assessment is defined but whether assessment information is used...”  
- Palomba & Banta

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***If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics,  
please contact Susie Olesen at [susie.olesen@isfis.net](mailto:susie.olesen@isfis.net).***

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