

# SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

## Ensuring Systemic Change

It is clear that the needs of public schools in the United States require Second Order systemic change in order to close the achievement gap. This calls for significant changes in values, beliefs, culture, and behavior at all levels of the system.

### *Second Order Change*

First Order change refers to an extension of past practices and typically focuses on doing a better job at what is already being done. Second Order change is related to complex change that exceeds existing paradigms and requires new knowledge and skills (Waters, 2004). The National Academy for Academic Leadership describes the differences between First Order and Second Order Change as: reversible vs. irreversible; non-transformational vs. transformation leading to something quite different. Second Order change is also viewed as continuous (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Key findings about Second Order change (Porrás, 1987; Hall & Hord, 2001) follow:

- Second Order change involves behavioral changes and individual belief systems that impact the relationships within the organization and the culture of the organization;
- key failings to moving to Second Order change revolve around poor or incomplete diagnosis of problems, lack of systemic planning, and failure to follow up;
- the number and complexity of innovations keep implementers at the mechanical or routine levels of implementation, which impedes Second Order change.

Second Order change is difficult for most organizations to achieve (Weick & Quinn, 1999). It is especially difficult for them to move from a focus on structures and efficiency to a focus on effectiveness (Waters, 2004). There is general agreement that Second Order change cannot be forced and is particularly sensitive to changes in leadership and staff.

### *Systemic Change*

Systemic change is comprehensive, with a fundamental change in one aspect of the system requiring fundamental changes in other aspects in order for it to be successful (Banathy, 1991; Reigeluth and Garfinkle, 1994). In education, systemic change requires that it pervade all levels of the system: classroom, building, district, community, state government, and federal government. It must include the nature of the learning experiences, the administrative system that supports the instructional system, and the governance system that governs the whole educational system. Efforts to create systemic change must recognize the interdependence of the educational system and its community, including parents, employers, social service agencies, religious organizations, and other private and public agencies. All of those stakeholders are required to assure ownership over the change effort (Jenlink, 1996). The community must develop a vision of their ideal educational system, create and take ownership of a shared vision of the new educational system, and develop a passion for their new vision (Jenlink, 1996).

These are key underpinnings necessary for systemic reform to occur (Ellsworth, 2000):

- involve stakeholder-ensuring so that everyone affected has input;

- coordinate efforts and work as a team – avoiding “us vs. them” syndrome;
- design for the ideal (challenging old assumptions);
- re-examine obstacles and research solutions;
- understand interrelationships;
- (re)create a viable system – making sure the end result works as a coherent whole.

*Synthesis: Functions for Creating Systemic Change*

In synthesizing the research on change, five main functions necessary for creating systemic change have been identified. These functions will be used throughout all phases of change efforts with the State. Figure 1 describes these functions with their major elements. This Figure is not meant to indicate that these functions should be followed in a prescriptive linear progression.

Figure 1: Systemic Change Functions and Elements

Function	Elements
Involve Stakeholders and Networks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bring Stakeholders to the Table</li> <li>2. Explore Possible Solutions - Create a Shared Vision</li> <li>3. Involve Additional Networks of Stakeholders/Participants</li> <li>4. Gain Support for the Changes</li> </ol>
Use Data	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify the Problem – See the Need</li> <li>2. Create Greater Understanding of the Problem/Need</li> <li>3. Monitor Progress, Seek Input, Evaluate, Adjust, Hold Accountable</li> </ol>
Share and Use Knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use Research to Identify Possible and Best Solutions</li> <li>2. Develop a Change Plan Guided by Change Theory</li> <li>3. Use Available Research to Guide Implementation of Solutions</li> </ol>

<p>Build System Capacity</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create Distributed Leadership to Carry Out the Plan</li> <li>2. Adjust Policies, Practices, Roles, Responsibilities to Support the Plan</li> <li>3. Provide Training and Resources to Institute the Plan</li> <li>4. Utilize Telecommunications and Technology to Support the Change</li> </ol>
<p>Build the Capacities of the Individuals Who Will Carry Out the Change</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify Needs and Concerns of Individuals</li> <li>2. Provide Support, Incentives, Rewards</li> <li>3. Support at All Levels of Use</li> <li>4. Ensure They Have Opportunities to Participate in Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluating</li> </ol>

### District-School Improvement Processes

C<sup>3</sup> technical assistance is based on recent research and literature about district and school improvement processes that are effective in low-performing schools. Based on the research, C<sup>3</sup> has developed strategies for improving school and district performance.

Elmore (2003) has codified design principles for large-scale improvement in school systems. He has identified five key practices that have created deep and coherent school improvement, and his central message is to *focus on instruction rather than structures*. Elmore’s five key practices include the following:

1. maintain a tight instructional focus sustained over time;
2. make accountability routine for practice and performance in face-to-face relationships; evaluate performance on the basis of all students (disaggregate);
3. reduce isolation and open practice to direct observation, analysis, and criticism; make direct observation of practice, analysis, and feedback a routine feature of work;

4. exercise differential treatment based on performance and capacity, not on volunteerism; acknowledge differences among communities, schools, classrooms within a common framework for improvement;
5. do not rely on generalized rules about centralization or decentralization; loosen and tighten control based on hard evidence of quality practice and performance of diverse groups of students.

### **School Improvement Phases**

Effective strategies for improving districts and schools are based on the recognition that not all schools are at the same point in the school improvement process or in their abilities to show improvement. Some schools are moving but still cannot hit their targets. Some are frozen. Some move forward but are unable to sustain growth and slip back. Some continue to lose ground year after year (Elmore 2003). This typology provides a way for technical assistance providers to identify and differentiate among schools. Of course, additional diagnosis of the school's progress is required before strategies can be selected to help the school move forward. Following are brief descriptions of the school improvement phases:

- *Problem Recognition* – a district or school is confronted with low student achievement
- *Low-Hanging Fruit (initial bounce)* – a district/school focuses attention on problems that can be easily addressed, if not solved (change in schedules, structures, instructional materials and initial professional development)
- *Stagnation* – pressure and support – the district or school has done the “easy” fixes; now the state or district needs to bring both pressure and support into a

delicate balance to get collective commitment to improving instruction, even in the face of hard work and disappointing growth

- *External Help* – focus turns to the best instructional practices and their implementation; this focus goes beyond using what they have been taught, to becoming integrated into teacher evaluation (pressure) and collegial/professional community (support)
- *Barrier Resolution* - identifying the next set of problems to tackle and why things are not working
- *Impossible Work* - improvement becomes more complex, moving to Second Order change – the will is there but not necessarily the skill – high levels of consistent support are important
- *Transformed Organization* - holding the course – results from the hard work are not yet apparent and may lag behind; the district or school knows the theory of action and trusts in the coherence of the collaboratively developed improvement plan. High levels of focus on instruction and learning are essential for Second Order change
- *Self-Managing of Improvement* – very few schools get here; leadership is consistent and the school is clear about its course

School districts are facing a variety of challenges, many of which serve to cloud the focus on the instructional core (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Before fully recommending specific technical assistance to districts or schools there must be a careful diagnosis of the needs and problems; the current capacity of the district mid-level support personnel who interact with schools most often; and the district's capacity about

knowledge of instruction, support for professional community, program coherence, technical resources, and leadership at all levels.

To support this kind of work, Reeves (2000) has identified common characteristics in the 90/90/90 schools (over 90 percent poverty, over 90 percent minorities, and yet over 90 percent achieving at high proficiency levels). He has also delineated leadership and teacher behaviors that promote improved achievement.

These high achieving schools were found to have five commonalities that are worth reviewing in some detail within our own schools. The five areas are:

1. There is a strong emphasis and focus on achievement.
2. There are clear curricular choices.
3. There are frequent assessment and multiple chances for students to show improvement.
4. There is a strong emphasis on writing in all academic areas.
5. There is external scoring of student work.

What is meant by each of these five common areas?

1. Focus on achievement is something that is celebrated and publicized throughout the school and throughout the community. Graphs, charts, and pictures of success are posted and displayed in classrooms, hallways, offices, and in local stores. High academic performance is rewarded with high praise. There are no more than five areas of focus within the school. Those students who are not able to meet the high standards at this time are placed in an intervention program that may be as long as three hours per day until they are ready to meet the standards.

2. When the curriculum focuses on only a few areas, mathematics, language arts, and reading, and these areas are covered in all content areas, the results are that test scores go up in all areas, not just in the focus areas.
3. Frequent assessments are given to students. When they do poorly on an assessment they are given multiple opportunities to succeed. They are not failures, they just need more time to reach the level of success. Student learning is the goal, not student grading. Weekly student assessment of progress is made by the teacher, and the child is encouraged to show improvement in the next week.
4. The most common characteristic of these high performing schools is that they have an ongoing writing performance assessment program. Research shows that creative writing is always stronger than informative or narrative writing, so the weaker writing areas must be given greater emphasis. There is a single rubric for all writing assignments in all content areas. This helps teachers to do a better job of evaluating student needs across the curriculum.
5. External scoring allows schools to develop a common assessment practice. By exchanging student work for assessment purposes, it helps the student with their achievement and it helps the teacher to maintain alignment of their curriculum, assessment practices, and expectations. It becomes the norm for teachers to work with a common rubric and to have a common understanding of the rubric.

There needs to be an alignment of the standards, curriculum, objectives, assessments, and available resources for a school to function at the highest possible level.

In order to reach success, Reeves describes the STAR Model for success. This includes:

1. Ongoing and focused professional development
2. Modeling of effective teaching and assessment practices
3. Ongoing professional collaboration
4. Effective communication between school staff, parents, and students
5. Visible tracking of student progress on a frequent and regular basis

Multiple school assessment practices must be implemented. There is a place for standardized assessments, teacher developed assessments, performance assessments, and other ways of finding students level of achievement.