



A UNITED COMMITMENT *to* CHANGE

DISTRICTS AND UNIONS COLLABORATE TO IMPLEMENT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS

By Ellen Holmes and Staci Maiers

In 2009, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced \$3.5 billion in Title I funding under Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, also referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Following the Department of Education’s announcement, 831 of the nation’s “persistently lowest-achieving schools” received federal funding during the 2010-11 school year to embark on significant change in the form of a School Improvement Grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The Department of Education was not interested in slow, incremental change. Rather, the goal was for immediate change. The expectation was that each federally funded school would take no more than three years to show dramatic positive gains in student achievement. The Department of Education offered four models of school

improvement:

- **Turnaround:** Replace the principal; rehire no more than 50% of the staff; and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility to fully implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.
- **Restart:** Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization selected through a rigorous review process.
- **School closure:** Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in other higher-achieving schools in the local educational agencies.
- **Transformation:** Replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; institute comprehensive instructional reforms; increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and provide operational flexibility and sustained support (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

In nearly every case, the school came under new leadership, and, in some instances, a large number of the staff was replaced. Under all four models, schools were quickly thrust into complex school-based change and required to demonstrate results at the end of three years of federal funding.

The Department of Education's objective for fast results, however, often counters the findings of leading research in education. Findings from education researchers have shown that "discovering what works does not solve the problem of program effectiveness" and "a poorly implemented program can lead to failure as easily as a poorly designed one" (Mihalic, Irwin, Fagan, Ballard, & Elliott, 2004).

The nation has an extensive track record with comprehensive school reform. There are more than 8,000 elementary and secondary schools adopting some form of a comprehensive school reform model, and results are pending. A major shortcoming of nearly all of these studies, however, is that they fail to account for the extent to which schools have actually implemented their chosen model (Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006). Thus, the question: What ingredients are needed for comprehensive school-based reform that is both positive and sustainable?

INGREDIENTS OF SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Sustainable change requires reform to be implemented over time and managed strategically to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a given comprehensive school improvement plan. Despite differences of ideology, there is a common desire to achieve real change without relying on unproven solutions. The balance exists, but to achieve successful school reform, the plan must engage the people closest to it — teachers, educators, and others who work with children in schools. And often the best way to reach and engage this population is through the associations that represent them at the local, state, and national levels.

According to the National Implementation Research Network, a group dedicated to the advancement of the science and practice of implementation, "Organizational change, system transformation to help solve social problems, educational researchers, policymakers, and leaders have consistently failed to acknowledge and communicate the importance of the implementation stage in the school improvement process" (Fixsen & Blase, 2009). Indeed, given the emphasis on planning — and the relative silence about implementation — in many of the resources meant to help with school improvement, school leaders easily can come away with the impression that if a team gets the plan right, successful implementation of that plan must surely follow. The implementation stage is the most difficult of all, and it is the stage where the majority of serious improvement efforts fail.

As administrators and teachers have discovered, imple-

ABOUT NEA'S PRIORITY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

The National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest teachers union representing more than 3 million members, has created a school-based, operational framework for its Priority Schools Campaign that focuses the organization's support in three areas:

1. Support and advocacy for priority schools as they implement School Improvement Grants, including professional development, school visits, and local advocacy on behalf of the schools.
2. Organizational capacity building to improve leadership skills of teachers and school leaders and increase collaboration among the superintendent, the district, and the leadership of the local union.
3. Engagement and outreach to better involve the community and successfully communicate the successes of each school as it undergoes turnaround.

NEA is working directly with 39 schools that are implementing School Improvement Grants in 17 states, providing intensive technical assistance to schools and districts as well as providing other resources to support the success of school turnarounds. Each of NEA's priority schools has a two-year plan for improvement that was co-created with local and state union affiliates, the district, and NEA. The union also provides strategic and on-the-ground support at no cost on matters such as educator practice and professional development, family and community engagement, communications support, and collective bargaining (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Those leaders who were successful in the implementation of a reform plan periodically checked to see if the staff's beliefs about the change were consistent with the plan. In addition to focusing on programs, services, consultants, and other necessary components of changes, they consistently were paying attention to the human aspects of systems change, beliefs, culture, collaboration, and behaviors. It is the human element that plays the most variable factor in the implementation of a plan, yet paradoxically is the element most often left out of the equation.



menting an improvement plan comes down to changing a complex organization in fundamental ways that address both the internal and external obstacles to implementation (Fixsen & Blase, 2009). These obstacles are most difficult to address because they are often tied up on cultural norms and beliefs in addition to human interests within and around the system. Work must be done at all levels in a school system to overcome implementation obstacles:

1. Prepare all school leaders for the difficulties of organizational change by helping them understand and anticipate the internal obstacles — technical, cultural, and political — that can arise, and give them tools and strategies to monitor change.
2. Address the external obstacles by transforming the relationship between districts and schools through ensuring adequate school support at the central office level

and adequate control over budgets and personnel at the school level, and by enacting policies that give principals more time to focus on leading change and improving classroom instruction (Fixsen & Blase, 2009).

Despite the difficulties, there are examples of schools making early success happen. Two schools that have implemented the transformation and turnaround models under the Department of Education's School Improvement Grant program have shown leading indicators of change: Evans School (formerly Howard Roosa Elementary School) in Evansville, Ind., and Quil Ceda and Tulalip Elementary School in Marysville, Wash.

EVANS SCHOOL EVANSVILLE, IND.

Evans School serves preschool through 6th grades with two self-contained emotional disability classrooms for district students. During the 2010-11 academic year, the district was awarded \$1.99 million (Indiana Department of Education, 2011) in School Improvement Grant funding to implement the transformation model in three schools, including Evans School. That same year, 98% of the student population qualified for free or reduced lunch. Under the transformation model, the building administration changed. The school building was closed, and the staff and student population of the school was moved to a different building within the district.

Realizing that implementation of the sweeping changes called for in the School Improvement Grant application requires changes to the current collective bargaining agreement, Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation and the Evansville Teachers Association jointly developed a plan called Equity Schools, focusing on two elementary schools and a middle school where scores on the state test were low and falling. The plan included increased professional development designed jointly by teachers and the district, and compensated longer school days and a longer year.

The district and union bargained the changes, including a requirement that, beginning in the 2010-11 school year, teachers wanting to work in the three schools were required to pass through a rigorous Equity Academy program designed by the district and the union. More teachers applied than there were positions available. This process has allowed the school staff to make site-based decisions resulting in lengthening the school calendar by 15 days for students and 20 days for staff. Additionally, teachers at Evans voted to implement the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement. This process also has allowed for the addition of student health and leadership components at Evans.

The implementation of professional learning communities and job-embedded professional development provided a structure allowing teachers and leaders in the building to make decisions collaboratively about changes necessary for increasing student achievement. During daily learning community time,

teachers used curriculum maps and common assessments they had created based upon Indiana standards and the needs of the students at Evans as well as other types of formative and summative data. In addition, administration and academic coaches were available to provide support to professional learning communities during the school day in the classroom. With support and training by the district, the school also began to use a data analysis process, where teachers studied assessment data to make instructional decisions.

Evans principal Brynn Kardash reported, "Throughout these changes, there has been a great deal of emotional impact on people in the building. It has been important to continually cultivate teacher support for the program changes we are making as well as continually focus on the vision of meeting the needs of all our students." High levels of professional support from the leadership of the building and the district have been crucial in building momentum for change, she noted. The administration recognized the importance of developing a positive attitude about the work being done and to celebrate successes as they come — a change from past precedence.

The students and staff at Evans School are beginning to see and own that success. The school corporation has seen significant increases over the past three years in its Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP) data, which is the state standardized test used to determine Adequate Yearly Progress. Districtwide, all grade levels showed an increase in students passing ISTEP core curriculum, with one exception of a drop of 1% at the 7th-grade level in English language arts. Substantial gains continued at Evans School in the past year under School Improvement Grant implementation. Math scores climbed 7% in 3rd grade, 4% in 4th grade, and 3% in 5th grade. English language arts scores jumped even higher, with 3rd and 4th graders each rising 7% and 4th graders increasing their scores by 10% (Jackson & DeWitt, 2011). Students are entering the next grade level better prepared than those the year before them.

Teachers and leaders at Evans School believe in the changes. They believe that job-embedded professional development, additional support personnel, master and mentor teachers, and continued collaborative decision making will help them continue to improve their craft, and as a result, continue to increase student achievement.

QUIL CEDA AND TULALIP ELEMENTARY SCHOOL MARYSVILLE, WASH.

Quil Ceda and Tulalip Elementary School are two schools that reside together on one campus on the Tulalip Reservation in Washington state. Together, the schools serve just over 500 students, and 65% are Native American, with a somewhat higher free and reduced lunch rate. Fighting a perception that schools have not historically served Native American students well, the schools' co-principals Kristin DeWitte and Anthony Craig, a Yakama native who is a member of the Tulalip Tribal

Community, are working to interrupt this history of academic failure. Through careful planning between the district and local union, the Marysville Education Association, both schools applied for the first and second cohorts of the federal School Improvement Grant program.

Tulalip Elementary, which was awarded nearly \$1.8 million in School Improvement Grant funding in the first cohort, originally chose the transformation model, but ultimately executed the turnaround model. After joining the Tulalip campus, Quil Ceda applied for the second-round cohort under the transformation model, adding \$1 million more in federal funding over three years. The School Improvement Grant funds were used to form a culture of collaboration that focuses on honoring student culture, developing data literacy through professional learning community structures, and implementing a Response to Intervention framework. The School Improvement Grant plan capitalizes on the premise that with good data, job-embedded professional development, and adequate time, educators can leverage their experience and expertise to target instruction and resources resulting in strong student achievement. The shared leadership of the district and union plays a key role by articulating a clear vision, expressing a sense of urgency, maintaining momentum, influencing practice, and driving for results.

The first major change was for staff from both schools to learn how to operate as one and come to agreement concerning the best way to serve Native American learners. DeWitte and Craig led the staff in developing and refining the objectives and implementation of the schools' mission. As part of this process, a percentage of teachers opted to transfer to other schools in the Marysville Public School District, which was supported through collaborative efforts between district and union leadership.

"It was clear that, in order to accelerate the progress of our students, we would be working differently, and not everyone was ready for that. Leadership and staff needed to be of one vision, and that is about getting struggling students to benchmark. Our schools did not have a history of serving our Native students and families well, and we wanted that to be our first order of business," said DeWitte. "Staff here needs to be focused on a process of inquiry that allows them to collaboratively discover what works best for our students."

The premise for all learning at Quil Ceda and Tulalip, both student and staff, is based on the work of Margery Ginsberg and Carol Dweck. "It is essential that teachers, coaches, and administrators start their problem-solving process by focusing on student strengths. When educators begin with what students can do, they can find an entry point," Craig said. "When we begin with what students can't do, we often turn to external reasons to justify why students aren't learning. We are breaking that cycle of blame and excuse."

Staff found they were motivated to change when their work was rooted in the relationships and relevance that collaborative teams provide. Much of this change toward a culture of collabo-

SEE THE VIDEO

Watch the Quil Ceda and Tulalip Elementary School's data team in action: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SU-1nVgludA.

ration came through the systematic use of instructional coaches supplemented by outside training sponsored by the union on effective collaboration and data use.

Data literacy is built around Doug Reeves' data team work. Grade-level teams meet three times a week to review student work and data. These meetings may be informed by instructional coaches or outside professional development. Collaboration and a mindset of growth are evident for both teachers and students.

With the development of data teams, the job-embedded professional development through increased coaching support, and time and training on collaborating for continuous improvement, the student achievement picture painted by midyear intervention data shows movement in all the right directions. In 2009, 39% of kindergarten students and 7% of 1st graders met benchmark using DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), with 22% of kindergarten students and 57% of 1st graders at the "intensive" level. In 2012, 70% of kindergarten students and 47% of 1st graders met benchmark, with only 6% of kindergarten students and 23% of 1st graders at the "intensive" level. Measured by the Northwest Education Assessment MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) tool, 58% of 3rd graders showed "better than expected gains" in reading. Fourth graders increased 50%, and 5th graders 53%.

IMPLEMENTATION ACHIEVED

Schools showing early signs of success from the first year of implementation of a comprehensive school reform plan share several factors in common: collaboration, data, increased skills, increased expectations, changes in beliefs and dispositions, development of meaningful partnership and wraparound services, and increased parent engagement. The early successes of these collaborative efforts also indicate that union-led and union-championed transformation is real and replicable. The current education reform climate seems to focus on a misguided narrative of unions as obstructionists and teachers as villains. In reality, however, teachers, education support professionals, and their unions are leading the transformation of public education with innovative and collaborative efforts that are resulting in positive and sustainable change.

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support that enhances learning outcomes is crucial for setting realistic goals, implementing research-based practices with fidelity, and assessing resulting changes in student outcomes (Drill, Miller, & Behrstock-Sherratt, 2012). The Doing What Works Initiative supports implementation of research-based practices by providing resources educators need for school improvement.

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