ALL TOGETHER NOW

INTERNAL COHERENCE FRAMEWORK SUPPORTS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAMS

BY ELIZABETH LEISY STOSICH, MICHELLE L. FORMAN, AND CANDICE BOCALA

More than a decade of research suggests that improving the quality of instruction and student learning requires leaders to set a vision for instruction, promote teacher learning around that vision, and foster organizational conditions for teacher collaboration and growth (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). Yet designing professional learning that enhances instructional leadership has proven challenging.

Previous attempts may have been unsuccessful because they targeted only school principals rather than teams of leaders or because they were conducted away from school sites rather than being job-embedded. Increasing school leaders' *knowledge* of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is insufficient. Improving instructional leadership requires increasing school leaders' *direct involvement* with teachers in these core areas.

A team-based approach to professional learning is more effective in enhancing the instructional leadership capabilities of administrators and teachers. Instructional leadership teams are a promising model for such an approach. These teams involve administrators and teachers in collectively improving teaching and learning through collaborative professional learning and a shared commitment to instructional improvement. This shared approach to leadership requires joint practice and learning. As our colleague Richard Elmore says, "You learn the work by doing the work."

We have worked collaboratively with district, school, and teacher leaders over the past 10 years to develop an approach we call the *internal coherence approach* to school improvement. With this approach, instructional leadership teams can transform their organizations from low-performing or stagnant to high-performing or improving.

This work began in the context of a collaboration between the Strategic

Education Research Partnership and Boston Public Schools and has been strengthened by partnerships with districts in California, Texas, and New York. Internal coherence is defined as the "collective capability of the adults in a school or educational system to connect and align resources to carry out an improvement strategy" (Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2017, pp. 2-3). By working toward higher levels of internal coherence, instructional leadership teams foster shared instructional leadership and build connections between teacher learning and student learning.

SHARED INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Research indicates that students learn at higher levels in schools where principals and teachers mutually contribute to leadership, as opposed to schools that lack teacher involvement in instructional decision-making (Ingersoll, Sirindes, & Dougherty, 2017).

Accordingly, leaders are under pressure to move away from hierarchical forms of leadership and toward shared or distributed models of leadership that engage administrators and teachers as partners. However, principals can find it difficult to share authority for decision-making with teachers on instructional leadership teams.

The internal coherence approach addresses this challenge by fostering shared leadership in a supportive environment that reinforces norms of public learning and safety for risk-taking. Through a team-based approach, principals involve teachers in sustained dialogue and decision-making about instruction and student learning while remaining central agents for change.

We worked with a principal and the instructional leadership team in a school that had been relatively successful in supporting the success of their students, including a large and diverse population of English learners, under the direction of a capable yet highly directive principal. However, when the principal learned more about the importance of involving teachers in setting school goals for improvement, educators on the instructional leadership team developed a greater sense of commitment to and responsibility for reaching these goals.

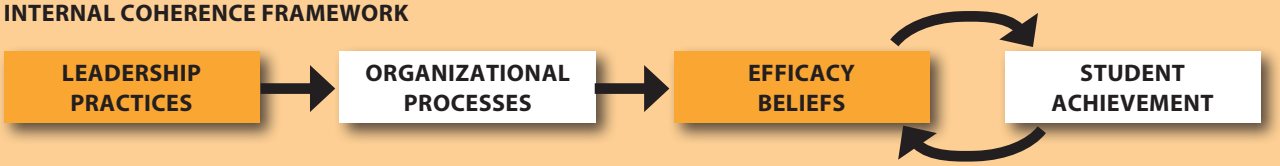
An instructional coach on the instructional leadership team described how the collaborative process they used to develop their vision, which focused on supporting students to have academic conversations, changed the way they worked as a school: "We need each other. … Now I feel like I'm part of a system that's helping us all work together to support our students."

CONNECTING STUDENT LEARNING AND TEACHER LEARNING

We designed the internal coherence approach to help instructional leadership teams create a consistent throughline from their vision for student learning to their goals for teacher learning. Too often, educators cannot see the connections between students' needs and professional learning opportunities and resources, which can lead to frustration with professional learning or other improvement efforts.

In contrast, the internal coherence approach emphasizes aligning professional learning resources around a vision for improved student learning. As illustrated in the figure below, the internal coherence approach to school improvement connects the work of leaders as the drivers of improvement, the organizational conditions that support meaningful

INTERNAL COHERENCE FRAMEWORK



Source: Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

professional learning, and teachers' beliefs about their efficacy in supporting student learning, which are positively associated with productive behaviors for improving student learning.

Specifically, this approach supports instructional leadership team members in developing a shared vision and strategy for improving teaching and learning, providing the opportunities for professional learning necessary to advance this strategy, and creating organizational conditions to support teachers in working collaboratively in teams to improve their practice. Each of these actions helps to ensure teachers' success with their students and, thus, raises the level of teachers' efficacy beliefs, which drives further improvement.

In a school context, efficacy refers to educators' beliefs that they can improve student achievement through intentional and effective practice. Experiences of efficacy are key because they motivate educators to try harder, attend more closely to low-performing students, and, ultimately, produce higher levels of student learning.

Collective efficacy — the idea that the faculty, working together, has what it takes to improve student learning — is particularly important for schoolwide improvement. Research shows that teachers' beliefs about their collective ability to support student learning are a more powerful predictor of student achievement than students' background demographics, such as race and socioeconomic status (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004).

Leaders, therefore, must optimally position educators to fortify their beliefs in their collective ability to improve student learning and, in doing so, encourage the productive behaviors that can fuel future improvement efforts.

In our experience in schools and districts, leadership development is particularly powerful when members of an instructional leadership team engage in what we describe as *essential practices.* These practices are based in research but have been systematically developed and tested with practitioners to assist them in carrying out their core responsibilities effectively.

GET THE SURVEY

Download the Internal Coherence Survey at **ic.serpmedia.org/assets/internal_coherence_survey_october2016.pdf.**

These essential practices make the work of improvement and instructional leadership concrete and actionable. To foster internal coherence, instructional leadership teams can begin by using three essential practices: setting a vision, creating a strategy for whole-school learning to reach the vision, and using data on organizational strengths and weaknesses.

1. Develop a vision for the instructional core.

Setting a vision for instruction and student learning is a critical leadership practice. Further, setting a vision is more powerful when leaders work collaboratively to make critical instructional decisions than when principals work in isolation.

The internal coherence approach includes a detailed process to support instructional leadership teams in collaboratively developing this vision, which serves as a guide for the improvement journey. When educators use frameworks such as the instructional core (Cohen & Ball, 1999) in combination with disciplinary content knowledge to create a vision, they can develop shared language to describe the nature of the interactions among teachers, students, and instructional content able to generate ambitious and equitable student outcomes.

When all educators have a clear sense of what they want to see in the instructional core — or, the way teachers and students will work with rigorous academic content — they are better able to take action to meet these goals.

A vision should be overarching but not vague. Too often, educational leaders focus on adopting a new curriculum or instructional approach without connecting it to a more specific vision of what students should be able to know and do, as well as a plan to support educators to make the necessary instructional shifts.

We worked with a district that had adopted an ambitious mathematics curriculum intended to support students in meeting the expectations of new college- and career-readiness standards. Initially, one school's instructional leadership team defined its vision as simply implementing the new program.

After engaging in the instructional visioning practice, however, team members began to identify the specific shifts they hoped to see in the instructional core — for example, students explaining the mathematical processes they used and justifying their answers with evidence. Then they were able to coordinate the work of everyone in the organization — administrators, teachers, and teams — to meet these goals.

2. Develop a strategy for instructional improvement.

Schools with high internal coherence develop not only a shared vision for effective instructional practice but a concrete plan for professional learning to work toward this goal.

When instructional leadership teams develop an improvement strategy, team members must identify the specific learning necessary to reach the instructional vision as well as the structures and processes that can be put in place to support this learning.

In other words, this practice requires instructional leadership teams to identify what will be learned, who will do the learning, where this

learning will occur, and how it will be coordinated to support schoolwide improvement.

In our experience, the acknowledgment that student success depends on a coordinated, organizational effort rather than solely the energy of individual teachers inside their classrooms resonates with practitioners.

For example, veteran teachers in one underperforming middle school articulated their excitement at hearing that they were finally going to work on conditions in the school at large, rather than being told that improvement was simply a function of individual educators teaching harder, teaching differently, or teaching more. Further, working collaboratively as an instructional leadership team to develop a strategy for improvement ensures teachers' voices are part of the decision-making process and increases their commitment to lead instructional change.

3. Use the Internal Coherence Survey to analyze current organizational capacity.

Once leaders have articulated their vision for instruction and created a strategy to coordinate the organizational resources to accomplish this vision, they need systems for collecting, analyzing, and acting on data that reflects progress toward this vision.

This information must go beyond data on student achievement to include data on organizational factors that enhance teacher learning and student performance, specifically those factors that leaders can influence, such as the extent to which teachers view their professional learning as meaningful and have sufficient time and support for collaboration in teams.

To deepen schools' data use practice, we developed the Internal Coherence Survey to use as part of leadership development. Using this survey, instructional leadership teams become better prepared to diagnose and take actions to improve organizational supports for professional learning (Elmore, Forman, & Stosich, 2016). Additionally, the survey provides an opportunity for all educators in the organization to participate in the improvement process by sharing their perspectives on critical school conditions.

The Internal Coherence Survey captures teachers' perceptions of the principal's instructional leadership, teacher collaboration for instructional improvement, meaningful professional learning, and other conditions and processes for supporting school improvement. We recommend that all faculty members responsible for instruction (e.g. teachers, paraprofessionals) complete the survey each year to allow the school community to assess its progress in strengthening conditions for learning and improvement over time.

A central part of our approach to leadership development involves reviewing and discussing the data from the Internal Coherence Survey, as it enables instructional leadership teams to align professional learning with what is needed most in their unique school context.

The results of the Internal Coherence Survey can support instructional leadership teams with diagnosing organizational strengths and weaknesses that could support or hinder their ability to successfully organize the adult learning required to reach their instructional vision. Thus, the survey data can be used to tailor a school's improvement strategy to the current reality of its organization, maximizing its chances for success.

For example, if a school's Internal Coherence Survey showed that most teachers viewed the time spent in teams as unproductive, a strategy relying heavily on teacher collaboration would have a low chance of gaining traction. An instructional leadership team with this profile might decide that the early phases of its improvement strategy would rely on whole-school professional learning led by an external expert, and that the instructional leadership team would work to fortify team processes over time.

Conversly, a school in which the Internal Coherence Survey revealed that teachers had positive perceptions of their teams' purpose and processes would do well to leverage this organizational capital and make sure that any improvement strategy placed a heavy emphasis on work in these structures.

SUSTAINING LEARNING OVER TIME

When educators work in a school where vision, improvement initiatives, professional learning, and their collaboration with colleagues all converge on the difficult work of rethinking current practices, teachers are optimally positioned to interact with students and content in more ambitious ways. When educators witness previously unseen levels of student thinking or engagement as a consequence of their changed practice, they revise their beliefs about what they and their students can do.

Education leaders can create these schools through a team-based approach to leadership development grounded in these essential practices. Developing the collective leadership capabilities of instructional leadership team members rather than principals alone can maximize the chance that their learning will be shared and sustained over time, even in the face of leadership turnover.

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planning and facilitating school-based professional learning on the math and science standards at the start of the 2018-19 school year.

At the end of the project, many schools indicated to facilitators that they planned to continue teacher collaboration on STEM practices, and we will continue to track teachers' knowledge and growth. At the start of the 2018-19 school year, district administrators asked us to continue the project. They elected to use their own funds to bring teachers together for four additional evening sessions. This continued work will be instrumental in ensuring the sustainability of the project goals.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We believe that three major design features were key to the development of the Connections project learning community.

Authentic and diverse collaboration. Teacher participants were most engaged when they saw direct implications for classroom instruction through authentic, challenging learning activities, such as the eclipse simulation described above. The diversity of participants' backgrounds and roles also contributed to a high level of collaboration and discourse, building participants' confidence and relationships with each other.

Trust through mutual accountability. The cohort of 32 teachers, along with the facilitators, knew from early in the project that they would hold each other accountable for learning. The book studies required teachers to respond to each other's feedback through the online platform. Later, the structure of the open-ended learning tasks required participants to ask questions and share ideas in an open forum.

Collective responsibility. Because teachers would see each other again in the context of their schools, there was a sense of future accountability to bring the learning back to their classrooms. Our emphasis on gradually developing leadership skills further imparted the expectation that participants would become advocates for math and science, making sustainable collaboration more likely.

This approach may have worked partially because this project was unusually intense: 224 professional development hours in 16 months. Developing teacher leaders is a complex process that was made possible in this project by the considerable time commitment and support from the learning community.

Meaningful and sustained teacher collaboration is an essential piece of realizing a shared vision for STEM education. Although specific instructional goals around math and science integration will continue to change, active professional learning communities engaging in an iterative process of implementation and reflection will directly impact the success of reaching these goals.

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