Indicator: The LEA has an LEA Support & Improvement Team. (5135)

Explanation: The evidence review confirms that transforming underperforming districts and schools requires the unified work of organized, effective, and accountable teams of professionals who will commit to adopting and engaging in shared and distributed leadership. Research confirms that results producing transformation teams requires active versus passive key stakeholder representation including the superintendent at the district level and the principal at the school level. In addition, key stakeholders may include but are not limited to assistant superintendents, assistant principals, directors of curriculum, special education, early childhood, and English Language learners, teacher leaders, department chairs, teacher union representatives, school board members, community members, and parents/caregivers.

Questions: How will the LEA know that it has organized effective transformation team structures in place? How will the LEA guide and/or oversee the work of the Transformation Teams? How will the LEA ensure that all key stakeholder voices are represented within the Transformation Teams? What evidence exists to confirm that the Transformation teams are productive? How will the LEA ensure that teams have the planning time needed to be successful?

Establishing Team Structures to Drive Improvement

The School Redesign Network at Stanford University (2010) terms distributive leadership "an essential practice for linked learning" (which is transforming education for California students by integrating rigorous academics with career-based learning and real world workplace experiences). Stanford cites Elmore (2000), who argues that the problem of scaling up school improvement, whether at the school or district level, is one of capacity building and specialization. Building a broad base of capacity is not possible if control is limited to a few individuals. He argues the solution is the broader distribution of leadership. Elmore asserts a strong plan, even with well-thought-out curricular strategies and a bold leader, will not succeed, much less go to scale, if leadership is limited to one or just a few individuals. Both the quality of the change and its ability to endure have proven tenuous, but reforms have been successfully sustained through a model of distributive leadership. The model extends the responsibility for leadership beyond the individual and weaves it into the relationships and interactions of multiple stakeholders (Aller & Irons, 2009). Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004) suggest that this interconnected system of leadership has the potential for having a profound impact on student learning.

Practices such as the development of agendas and minutes and the use of organized procedures for meetings help the teams stay focused and maintain a history of team work. Boudett, City, & Murnane (2005) suggest that, after agreeing on strategies to address a problem, the team should set specific, measurable goals—long-term, medium-term, and short-term—to determine whether the intervention is working.

Organizing the District Team

The first major action is to form a district team. This team will be responsible for organizing and leading the process. Having a strong governance team is a key component of success.

This can be a huge job – and a difficult one if your district has been uncomfortable making big changes in the past. Big change requires a focus on student learning above all, and willpower to resist inevitable pressure to compromise. The team must be committed to taking new approaches when previous efforts have not worked well enough for failing students.

Having a team is not enough if your superintendent and school board are not ready to

support big changes with resolve. Some school board members may be unfamiliar with major options or may not support any efforts that "stir the pot" of public dissent, even when change is needed for struggling students. If you cannot obtain this support, a state takeover may be needed to help students in failing schools. But even when top leadership – the superintendent or school board – initiates and leads the process, a team is needed to plan, execute, and monitor major change in multiple schools.

Keep the working team small enough to focus on action. Teams larger than seven members may have trouble making decisions and taking action. Your district team may begin its work with only a few central office staff members. One of your early steps will be including all important stakeholders in other ways. You also may choose to involve outside transformation experts or process facilitators to help, either immediately or at a later date.

Selecting Team Members

Which people should be on your team? Readiness and willingness to drive major change are important, but credibility and district knowledge also are important.

Consider including the following people with the following attributes and skills.

A Drive for Results. This includes a record of implementing change despite political and practical barriers, an unyielding belief that all students – no matter how disadvantaged – can learn, and organizing and planning skills to keep the decision-making process and implementation for each failing school on track.

Relationships and Influence Skills. This includes good relationships with a wide range of district staff, parents, and community organizers; willingness and ability to disagree with others politely; teamwork skills to complete tasks responsibly and support team members; and strong influence skills.

Readiness for Change. This includes having an open mind about ways to improve student learning, willingness to learn about what changes work under differing circumstances, willingness to try new strategies, and not having a political agenda that may interfere with student learning-centered decisions.

Knowledge to Do What Works (or Willingness to Acquire It Quickly). This includes knowledge of the formal and informal decision-making processes in your district; knowledge of past efforts to change and improve schools in your district; and knowledge of education management and effective schools research, with a focus on what has been proven to produce learning results with disadvantaged students. (Learning Point Associates, 2010, pp. 75–76)

What Are the Leadership Roles on the District Team?

This decision may have been made by the superintendent. If not, now is the time to decide. Who is ultimately accountable for making sure that the team is working well and accomplishing the objective of speedy, high-quality decisions about each failing school?

In many cases, this will be the person charged with organizing the team in the first place, perhaps someone appointed by and reporting to the superintendent. In other cases, this role might change over time. But at all times, it is critical to know who is accountable for ensuring that your team meets its mission and making changes if it is not.

A deputy or assistant superintendent, a curriculum director, or another senior district staff member may be the right person. Position alone is not enough, however. Strong team leadership skills are essential to keep the district team motivated, informed, and productive through a challenging change process. In some cases, a credible outsider who is familiar with the district schools may be the best choice.

The superintendent may be a member of this working team or, in a smaller district, may lead it. However, this should be a true working team, and time constraints may prevent some superintendents from playing this role. Instead, teams with full support of and a direct reporting relationship to the superintendent can be just as effective as those led by the superintendent. If the superintendent appoints a representative, this person should be fully empowered and obligated to perform on the team, and not just act as a note taker. In any case, the superintendent is a critical stakeholder who will have the ultimate decision-making authority about what options will be presented to the school board.

What Process Will You Use to Stay Informed and Make Decisions as a Team?

Ground norms can help to ensure the team members participate efficiently and effectively. Take time to set these norms with the group. Questions to guide the effort include:

- When should you meet and how often?
- Who will schedule meetings? How?
- What do you need in advance and who will provide it?
- Who will collect and distribute additional agenda items and supporting material?
- Are standing meetings mandatory? What happens if someone does not attend? Will you still be able to make decisions?
- Who will facilitate the meetings to ensure that you prioritize and address all critical agenda items?
- How will you make decisions – by consensus, vote, or other?
- Under what circumstances will you make decisions outside of group meetings? How? Through e-mail? Are there some decisions that require discussion?
- Who is responsible for communicating decisions to those who cannot attend?
- What will you do if you disagree with a decision?
- What information will you share through e-mail?
- Are there other issues to be addressed?

(Learning Point Associates, 2010, pp. 81–82)

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