Documenting and Reporting Progress to Inform Practice

Center on Innovation & Improvement

Targeted school improvement efforts focused on rapid change for the lowest performing schools need to establish early and tangible indicators of positive change. Absent clear evidence of progress, state and district leaders charged with directing school improvement efforts must require school leaders to examine their strategies and make necessary mid-course corrections. Identifying leading indicators of change and subsequently making necessary adjustments can significantly accelerate rapid improvement success rates (Hassel & Hassel, 2009).

Assessment results, at the classroom, school, district, or state level are established components of current federal and state accountability systems. Yet, annual assessments are a relatively blunt instrument. Furthermore, they don't provide school leaders or instructional personnel with timely information that can influence real-time school operations and classroom practice. Therefore, states and districts need to establish a systematic way of collecting and using a variety of information to inform its district and school personnel about whether positive progress is being made toward improving student learning.

There is not an established base of literature related to leading indicators of change, but lessons gleaned from the cross-sector research on effective turnaround initiatives and emerging research on statewide systems of support provide insight upon which states and districts can build unique leading indicator systems. Research on turnaround efforts inside and outside education indicates that effective turnaround leaders engage in a consistent set of actions that in combination drive dramatic improvement. Of note for leaders charged with documenting and reporting progress, successful turnaround leaders choose "a few high priority goals with visible payoffs and use early success to gain momentum, motivate staff, and dis-empower naysayers" (Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel 2009, p. 4). These wins focus on key leverage points that lead to dramatic improvements in school performance that will eventually be confirmed on state assessments. Examples of early wins that could serve as tangible indicators of positive change include: 1) boosting attendance and decreasing disciplinary rates in the first two months of the school year; 2) demonstrating significant increases in achievement as documented in formative assessments in a specific academic area such as "aiming by the end of the first semester to have 90 percent of fifth graders on track to make grade level by year's end (Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel 2009. p. 4). The converse of early wins are school conditions that predict later failure (Hassel & Hassel 2009). Potential examples of early indicators of failure are high mobility of strong teachers, persistent low staff morale, and ongoing or escalating school discipline issues.

In *Evaluating the Statewide System of Support with Rubrics, Explanations, and Exemplars*, the Center on Innovation & Improvement established 42 indicators to guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of each state's system of support. Examples of indicators are: 1) strong data system that district and school personnel can utilize to inform decisions that positively impact instruction and curriculum and 2) established process for using state assessment results to provide differentiated services for schools, especially those identified as continuously failing.

These early indicators are not the final measure of progress, but they serve as key evidence that school leaders are taking the steps necessary to lead to positive academic growth. Absent evidence of positive change, state and district leaders need to proactively assess the degree to which the specified change strategy is in fact changing the curriculum or instruction in the chronically low-performing school identified for corrective action. Rather than waiting three to five years for lack of or limited evidence of positive change, states and districts should encourage rapid retry of alternative approaches (e.g., replace turnaround leader or external provider) (Hassel & Hassel 2009).

Action Principles

For State

1. Identify indicators of positive change and pinpoint school conditions that predict later failure.

2. Provide districts with means to measure leading indicators (e.g., formative assessments or state data systems that allow districts to track student attendance and discipline referrals in real time).

3. Develop policies that encourage rapid retry efforts when rapid improvement efforts fail.

4. Provide political cover to districts tracking leading indicators of positive change and when necessary, engaging in rapid retry efforts.

5. Anticipate some failures on road to dramatic improvement and build a pipeline of school turnaround and transformation leaders, as well as external providers (e.g., charter management organizations and education management organizations).

For District

1. Track indicators of positive change and pinpoint school conditions that predict later failure.

2. Measure leading indicators (e.g., formative assessments or state data systems that allow districts to track student attendance and discipline referrals in real time).

3. Anticipate need to try again when rapid improvement efforts fail.

4. Engaging in rapid retry efforts when failure occurs, do not allow schools to languish for three to five years absent clear indicators of progress that will dramatically improve student outcomes.

5. Cultivate pipeline of school turnaround and transformation leaders as well as external providers (e.g., charter management organizations and education management organizations).

References and Resources

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