ASSESSING SCHOOL CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT AND SUSTAIN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-LEVEL TRANSFORMATION PRACTICES

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Abstract

There are two objectives of this paper. The first is to study school transformation as it occurs. This phenomenon is examined through a nonprofit organization's efforts to transform a group of low-performing, high-poverty, high-minority urban elementary schools into high-performing schools capable of sustaining student achievement growth. Partners in School Innovation has developed a research-based model for school transformation that builds on the human capital that already exists at a school. It has also developed a measure of a school's capacity to not only transform, but also to sustain those practices essential for growth and improvement. The second objective of this paper is to present results from the first year of using this measure to assess school transformation in the group of schools being served by Partners in School Innovation during the 2009-2010 school year.

Introduction

Public education lies at the intersection of American democracy, national security, and economic prosperity. Since 2001, the Federal government has pressed for dramatic student achievement gains by holding schools accountable for test score performance. To the same end, the Obama administration is making major new investments in support of educational reforms and innovations. Yet the achievement gap continues to weaken our nation. From the start of their schooling, under-represented minority students from low-income families experience acute disparities in access to high-quality education. By 4th grade, African American and Latino students are, on average, nearly three years behind their white and Asian counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) and by middle and high school, close to 90% are reading behind grade level (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009). African American and Latino students drop out of school at more than twice the rate of their white and Asian peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Because of the correlation between education and earnings, employment, and career advancement, not closing the achievement gap will place the United States in a permanent recession, risking the future of our children and the success of our nation (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

While the need to transform America's lowest-performing schools is widely acknowledged, there is confusion around how this transformation will actually occur. Over the past three years, the federal government has budgeted over $3.5 billion to address this issue in the form of stimulus funding and School Improvement Grants. States are expected to use these monies to turn around low-performing schools using one of four models. *Transformation* requires a new school leader, but can be implemented with existing faculty. *Turnaround* occurs when both the leader and the majority of the faculty are removed from the campus. *Restart* places the school under the management of an external, often a charter, organization. *School closure* is the final option that can be implemented with federal funds.

Even though the federal government has provided explicit guidance around implementing the four models, there is plenty of confusion around what transformation and turnaround are supposed to look like in real-time (Kutash, et al., 2010). Scott and Kober (2010) surveyed a sample of the nation's school districts and found that over one-third districts surveyed were

unfamiliar with the four federal turnaround models and that only one in ten had actually implemented any of the models.

In addition to the confusion around what school transformation actually looks like on the ground, the federal definitions of transformation and turnaround require a change of personnel. This is problematic when considering the tenure structure in America's school districts. Administrators and teachers who are fired from one school are not necessarily out of a job. They can "bump" employees with less seniority out of the system. The people doing a poor job educating children at School A may end up at School B doing the same poor job that led to their ouster. The "dance of the lemons" is an all-too realistic scenario in many districts trying to adhere to federal transformation and turnaround models. When the same school leaders and teachers are simply moved from school to school without being taught any new skills, there is a clear and present danger of perpetuating the achievement gap and creating a permanent underclass made up of the students who were supposed to be helped by these billions of dollars.

Partners in School Innovation (PartnersSI) is a San Francisco-based reform support organization founded in 1993. The organization's mission is to enable public schools in high-poverty Bay Area communities—serving students of color and English Learners—to achieve educational equity through school-based reform. The main driver for this reform is elementary school literacy development. For most of the past 16 years, PartnersSI focused its resources on improving instructional quality in the classroom. In June 2009, PartnersSI hired a new CEO, who kept the organization's mission intact, but shifted the unit of focus from the classroom to the school. In this new approach, teachers are still viewed as the critical driver for improving literacy skills. However, for these improvements to be sustainable, the entire school community must transform its ways of working. Instead of starting from scratch with new administrators and teachers, the capacity to transform is built within the existing human capital at a school. Supporting the professional learning of the adults in a school consistently and to a high quality can lead to administrators who are more effective leaders and teachers who are more effective instructors (Fullan, 2006; Joyce & Showers, 2002).

Because of PartnersSI's desire to support, rather than jettison, existing human capital, the organization decided to develop an internal measure of capacity building that could be linked to

the implementation of its approach. While there are many existing measures of school capacity building (Learning Point Associates, 2010), those that were developed to measure the federal government's definitions of transformation and turnaround may not have been designed to assess school capacity in existing human capital, which is the foundation of the PartnersSI School Transformation Approach. The School Transformation Rubric was designed during the 2008-2009 school year and was piloted during the 2009-2010 school year.

The purpose of this study is to attempt to answer the following two questions:

1. What might the school transformation process look like when a school's existing human capital is supported in the effort?
2. How did PartnersSI build capacity in the schools it served during the 2009-2010 school year, as measured by the internally-developed School Transformation Rubric?

In the interest of full disclosure, the author of this paper is an employee of PartnersSI.

Theoretical Framework

PartnersSI currently focuses its support on elementary school children because these years represent a foundational period for students to develop proficiency in basic skills and enthusiasm for learning, both of which are foundational for future learning and ultimate success in life. For students who lack these fundamentals, the consequences are profound. A child who is not reading at grade level by third grade is unlikely to graduate from high school (Snow, et al., 1998). Students should leave the primary grades with a strong foundation of skills and knowledge and a learning disposition that will equip them for success as they progress through school and prepare for college, the workplace, and citizenship. Literacy is the cornerstone of that strong foundation.

While good teaching plays a critical role in under-represented minority student achievement (Haycock, 1998; Sanders, et al., 1997), any benefits from good teaching will not be sustainable without systems and structures in place that will allow for effective teaching to flourish where it exists and to spread to classrooms where it does not. These structures are often established by school leaders in collaboration with teachers and are maintained by the entire school community. High-achieving, high-poverty schools with large numbers of under-represented minority students

are results-oriented and more culturally responsive. Teachers at such schools tend to be more prepared to teach. They are more likely to collaborate around lesson planning and to teach a rigorous, standards-based curriculum. They assess and re-teach often to push their students toward standards mastery. Administrators at such schools tend to focus on being instructional leaders and on consistently monitoring progress toward results (Berends, et al., 2002).

Based on the above research, PartnersSI has identified four key elements of school transformation: results-oriented leadership, integrated systems of professional learning, effective pedagogical practices, and a strong core instructional program. These are the foundation of both program and of our School Transformation Rubric.

Results-oriented leadership

Results-oriented leaders focus their efforts on creating a school environment where high-quality teaching and learning can occur. A results-oriented leadership approach is critical to transform schools and achieve extraordinary student learning results (Marzano, et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Elmore, 2000). Results-oriented leaders build the sense of ownership and the organizational capacity needed to sustain results. Strong results-orientation enables school leaders to focus on student outcomes and align the school's resources, structures and policies to achieve those goals. They carry out daily actions that drive whole-school improvement efforts to raise the quality of teaching and learning.

One of the most powerful ways results-oriented leaders create a transformative school environment is through a culture of inquiry (Richardson, 2007; Wiggins & McTeague, 2005). Effective leaders develop a clear and compelling vision for school success and establish goals for student achievement and adult capacity. Once these goals are established and clearly communicated, results-oriented leaders create an action plan for achieving their targets. A system for monitoring the implementation of the action plan is also developed and student data are used to reflect on progress and adjust the plan as needed.

Integrated systems of professional learning

Leaders in transforming schools develop and strengthen the systems that support teachers' professional learning to ensure sustained student achievement gains. A transforming school's leadership team should be responsible for setting school-wide goals for student achievement and

adult capacity, monitoring the implementation of the school's action plan, and supporting teachers through the implementation process (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Professional learning structures enable adults to learn new content and skills and provide the opportunity for them to learn from each other. These structures must function as a tightly aligned system that enables teachers to develop a robust core instructional program, grow their practice, and deliver excellent instruction and thereby ensure high student achievement. This systemic approach fosters a culture of professional learning and continuous improvement.

Research on teacher professional learning has demonstrated that when teachers receive high-quality professional development, have regular opportunities to collaborate, both in grade levels and as a whole staff, the quality and effectiveness of their instruction improves (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Fullan, 2006; DuFour, 2004; Joyce & Showers, 2002). In addition to having protected and effective collaboration time, teachers must also be supported by capable instructional coaches. School leaders, instructional coaches, and teacher peers can most effectively assist teachers by helping them to articulate their vision for teaching and learning, to support them to learn the practices and skills needed to achieve that vision, and to examine multiple sources of student data to monitor and adjust their practice as needed (Bloom, et al., 2005; Marzano, et al., 2005)

Core instructional program

A strong core instructional literacy program is at the heart of a transformed school. Teachers must learn to implement a rigorous curriculum, purposefully use assessments and data, engage in results-oriented planning, and strategically intervene when students may be behind. In addition, teachers should possess pedagogical practices designed to meet the learning needs of students of color (Goldenberg, 2008; Brown-Chidsey, 2007).

Teachers are the best resource a school has, since they have the most influence over student learning by virtue of the sheer amount of time they spend with students. Effective teaching can outweigh the heavy burden of poverty on student achievement: it far outweighs the effects of a student's previous achievement level, class size or the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of a classroom (Sanders, et al., 1997). An effective teacher's influence is lasting and can be seen at least four years after a student has left the classroom (Rivers & Sanders, 1996).

However, teachers don't all have the same level of success in boosting student achievement. In a single year, the difference between an effective and an ineffective teacher can mean a full level of achievement for a student (Hanushek, 1992). Even bigger differences—as many as 50 percentile points—show up when a student is taught by a series of high-quality versus low-quality teachers (Rivers & Sanders, 1996). If a poor child has a high-quality teacher for five years in a row, the effect of poverty on achievement can be eliminated (Rivkin, et al., 2001).

Driving the practice of the most effective teachers are three key elements: an understanding of how to strategically plan objective-driven lessons, an ability to deliver lessons effectively by adapting to student learning needs, and a commitment to reflection and constant improvement to further the opportunities of their students. On a practical level, teachers serve as coaches for students, providing direction when needed, offering clear instruction that is accessible to students of all learning modalities, and supporting students in bringing their best selves to the classroom. They bring an equity lens to their work, ensuring that all instruction is at an appropriate level of rigor and embodies culturally responsive practices. Through all their actions and strategic choices, the most effective teachers consistently communicate high expectations and infuse a genuine belief that all students - regardless of their economic, racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds - are able to excel.

PartnersSI School Transformation Approach

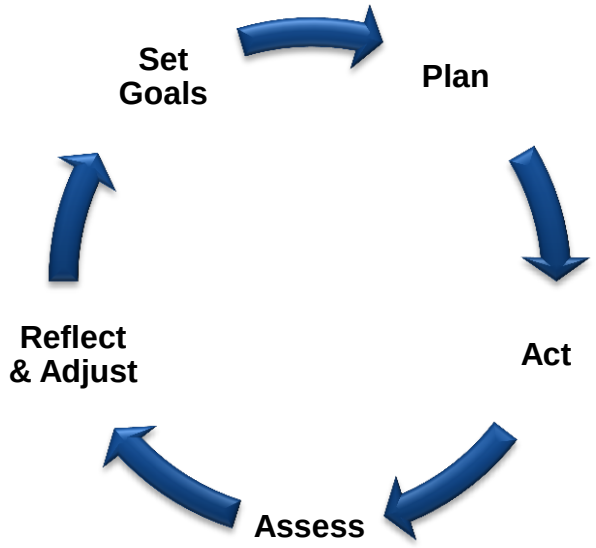
PartnersSI assists urban high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools in the transformation process. Field staff work in our partner schools from one to three days per week for the entire school year. Partnerships generally last from one to five years. We make every effort to sustain our partnerships beyond one year. Field staff work with school leaders and teachers in the following ways:

- Providing ongoing coaching for principals, coaches and teacher leaders on the results-oriented approach that is critical to transforming instruction and sustaining results. This work focuses on the implementation of essential practices needed to create a school environment where high quality teaching and learning can take place,

- Building the capacity of school leaders—including principals, coaches and teacher leaders—to develop and strengthen the systems that support teachers' professional learning to ensure sustained student-achievement results, and
- Building the capacity of grade-level teams of teachers to build and integrate the individual pieces of a strong core instructional program that meets the needs of all students to ensure sustained student-achievement results.

The primary mechanism PartnersSI uses for accelerate progress toward building school capacity to transform is the Results Oriented Cycle of Inquiry™ (ROCI). PartnersSI supports leaders and teachers to incorporate ROCI cycles into their everyday practice. The steps of ROCI can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The ROCI Cycle



PartnersSI guides school leaders and teachers through the ROCI process using multiple data sources, such as standardized tests, interim benchmark assessments, curriculum-based interim assessments and teacher-designed formative assessments. Partner schools set meaningful goals around student achievement; plan for achieving those goals through effective use of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; act on the developed plans through effective implementation, assess progress toward goals, reflect on progress in teams, make any necessary adjustments to student

achievement goals and plans, and start the cycle again. It is important that leaders and teachers engage in the ROCI cycle in teams. Data use in such an inquiry cycle is most likely to be adopted in school systems when there is interaction and negotiation among colleagues (Halverson, et al., 2007; Means, et al., 2007).

Method

School Transformation Rubric

PartnersSI created the School Transformation Rubric (STR) to measure a school's capacity to engage in and sustain the transformation process with existing human capital. Based on the reviewed research, it is organized around three domains: results-oriented leadership, integrated systems of professional development, and a core instructional program. Each domain of the STR contains several key capacity areas. These capacity areas are where PartnersSI targets its work with schools. The capacity areas for each domain are below:

- Results-oriented leadership
    - Vision and goals
    - Instructional action plan
    - Implementation and monitoring (of the instructional action plan)
- Integrated systems of professional development
    - Leadership team
    - Grade-level collaboration
    - Whole-staff professional development
    - Instructional coaching
- Core instructional program
    - Pedagogical practices
    - Rigorous curriculum
    - Assessment and purposeful use of data
    - Strategic intervention
    - Results-oriented planning

Within each capacity area lies a set of essential practices administrators and teachers need to incorporate into their ways of working to show improvement in that particular area. There are a total of 55 essential practices that make up the STR.

The STR represents school transformation in six stages, indicating the extent of implementation of each essential practice. The stages of each essential practice in a capacity area are averaged to determine the capacity built in that particular capacity area. Table 1 shows stage descriptions. In the first stage, there is no evidence that an essential practice is being implemented anywhere in the school. At stage six, the essential practice is being fully implemented by the school community and that implementation is sustainable even after our engagement with the school ends. Capacity growth is measured by the movement from one stage of implementation to the next at the essential practice level. For example, movement from stage two to stage three is equal to one band movement; movement from stage one to stage three is equal to two band movements, etc.

Table 1: School Transformation Rubric Stages

Stage	Stage Description
1	**There is no evidence** of the essential practice at the school.
2	**Readiness.** School leadership and/or staff is aware of the need and appears willing to move toward implementation of the essential practice.
3	**Emerging.** Practitioners are growing their capacity to implement the essential practice; essential practice is emerging within the school.
4	**Implementing.** Implementation of the essential practice is underway in targeted areas across the school.
5	**Transforming.** Implementation of the essential practice is well-integrated into the school community and is consistent across the school.
6	**Sustaining.** Policies, structures and cultural conditions are in place to sustain the essential practice, adapting as needed to a changing environment.

To determine if a school's capacity has been built, a school transformation review is conducted twice a year. The school transformation review process gathers data from three sources: the school's assessment of their capacity, field staff assessment of the school's capacity, and

evidence gathered from classroom observations and teacher focus groups conducted by a team of field staff not working with that particular school. Field staff then use these data sources to establish triangulated scores for each essential practice. Beginning-of-year (BOY) STR data were collected during fall 2009 and end-of-year (EOY) STR data were collected in spring 2010.

Sample

The STR was administered in our 13 partner elementary schools we served during the 2009-2010 school year. One school needed to be removed from analysis due to significant program implementation irregularities. Our partner schools are all located in urban school districts in the San Francisco Bay Area. All partner schools have large populations of under-represented minority students and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Results

Table 2 shows average partner school capacity growth by STR capacity area. A detailed table showing STR capacity growth by capacity area and by essential practice can be found in Appendix A. Overall, our partner schools showed growth in all capacity areas. Most of the growth was achieved between the Readiness and Emerging stages. It suggests that our partner schools recognized the need to build capacity in these areas at the beginning of the school year. By the end of the school year, there was evidence that they were implementing essential practices in pockets around the school.

Table 2. Average Partner School Capacity Growth by STR Capacity Area

Beginning and End-of-Year STR Stages	BOY	EOY	Growth
Results Oriented Leadership			
Vision and Goals	2.7	3.4	0.7
Instructional Action Plan	2.5	3.7	1.2
Implementation and Monitoring	2.2	3.8	1.6
Integrated System for Professional Learning			
Leadership Team	2.3	2.8	0.6
Grade Level Collaboration	2.7	3.4	0.7
Whole Staff Professional Development	2.4	3.5	1.1
Instructional Coaching	2.3	3.6	1.3
Core Instructional Program			
Essential Pedagogical Practices	2.4	3.1	0.7
Rigorous Curriculum	2.6	3.3	0.7
Assessment and Purposeful Use of Data	2.8	3.6	0.8
Strategic Intervention	2.2	3.0	0.8
Results Oriented Planning	2.6	3.4	0.8

In the Results-oriented Leadership domain, nearly all schools grew in their capacity to develop and monitor their instructional action plans. It was the capacity area where our schools achieved the most overall growth last year.

In the Integrated Systems for Professional Learning domain, we saw substantial growth in schools' ability to plan whole-staff professional development and to deliver instructional coaching. However, our partner schools did not build much capacity with respect to the development of a results-oriented leadership team. A closer examination of the essential practices in this capacity area reveals that partner schools built the most capacity around transparent decision making and communication, and the least around examining the role of race and class in education.

There was less overall growth in the Core Instructional Program domain. In a pattern similar to the leadership team, we saw more growth with respect to planning and monitoring instruction. A closer examination of the essential practices in this capacity area show that there was little

capacity built around using culturally responsive pedagogy and meeting the needs of English learners.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the STR data, PartnersSI learned that its approach appeared to be successful with respect to helping school leaders and teachers plan and monitor for improved student achievement and adult capacity. We were more successful in supporting schools with creating results-oriented leaders and building systems to support professional learning than we were with building a strong core instructional core program. Much work still needs to be done to improve school capacity to support the diverse needs of students.

However, any conclusions that are drawn from these STR data are limited in their interpretive power. This is the first year PartnersSI has used the STR and that our sample consisted of only 12 schools. More development work is being undertaken to determine the validity of the STR as a tool to measure school capacity to transform using existing human capital. The Results-oriented Leadership domain has been further developed to specifically call out those essential practices leaders must engage in with respect to developing an instructional action plan, monitoring and reflecting on its implementation, and making necessary adjustments. We also expect to be able to establish the reliability of the STR with an additional year of data, which we will have by the 2010-2011 school year.

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Appendix A: STR Stages by Domain, Capacity Area, and Essential Practice

Beginning and End-of-Year STR Stages	BOY	EOY	Growth
Results Oriented Leadership			
Vision and Goals	**2.7**	**3.4**	**0.7**
Shared long-term vision	2.8	3.3	0.5
Shared student achievement goals	2.6	3.5	0.9
Instructional Action Plan	**2.5**	**3.7**	**1.2**
Theory of action	2.8	3.9	1.2
Instructional action plan	2.2	3.4	1.3
Implementation and Monitoring	**2.2**	**3.8**	**1.6**
Implement the plan	2.1	3.8	1.7
Monitor and adjust the plan	2.3	3.8	1.5
Integrated System for Professional Learning			
Leadership Team	**2.3**	**2.8**	**0.6**
Diverse membership	3.4	4.0	0.6
Develop and implement plan	2.1	2.7	0.6
Individual and shared accountability	2.2	2.8	0.6
Transparent decision making and communication	2.1	2.8	0.8
Examining the role of race and class	1.7	1.9	0.3
Grade Level Collaboration	**2.7**	**3.4**	**0.7**
Protected Grade Level PLC Time	3.8	4.4	0.7
Results-oriented planning	2.7	3.9	1.3
Review of data	2.8	3.6	0.8
Reflect and refine practice	2.8	3.3	0.6
Examination of race and class	1.4	1.9	0.5
Collective responsibility	2.9	3.5	0.6
Whole Staff Professional Development	**2.4**	**3.5**	**1.1**
Alignment with goals and instructional action plan	2.9	4.4	1.5
High quality	2.5	3.7	1.2
Develops cultural competence	1.7	2.3	0.7
Instructional Coaching	**2.3**	**3.6**	**1.3**
System for instructional coaching	2.4	3.7	1.3
Alignment with PD and collaboration	2.3	3.4	1.1
Instructional coaching cycles	2.0	3.6	1.6

	BOY	EOY	Growth
Core Instructional Program			
Essential Pedagogical Practices	**2.4**	**3.1**	**0.7**
Common practice across classrooms and grade levels	2.9	3.6	0.7
Strategies for supporting students of color	2.2	2.9	0.8
Culturally responsive classroom management	2.8	3.1	0.3
Communicate objectives	2.6	3.3	0.7
Scaffold Instruction	2.3	3.1	0.8
Build student independence	2.5	3.2	0.7
Differentiation	2.3	3.0	0.8
Flexible grouping	2.3	3.1	0.8
Student engagement strategies	2.7	3.3	0.6
Student investment in goals	1.8	2.8	1.0
Support for English Learners	2.8	3.3	0.5
Strategic allocation of instructional minutes	2.3	2.9	0.7
Rigorous Curriculum	**2.6**	**3.3**	**0.7**
Standards-based units	3.0	3.8	0.8
Alignment with language program model	2.5	3.2	0.7
Culturally relevant	2.3	2.4	0.2
Use of student achievement data to adjust curriculum	2.8	4.0	1.3
Clearly defined proficiency	2.5	3.3	0.8
Alignment across classrooms and grades	2.8	3.2	0.3
Assessment and Purposeful Use of Data	**2.8**	**3.6**	**0.8**
Comprehensive set of assessments	3.1	4.0	0.9
Expectations for administering assessments	3.2	3.8	0.7
Use of comprehensive set of assessments	3.0	3.8	0.8
Use of disaggregated data	2.3	3.3	0.9
Use of data system	2.4	3.3	0.9
Strategic Intervention	**2.2**	**3.0**	**0.8**
School-wide system of academic interventions	2.3	2.8	0.5
Effective use of instructional specialists	2.3	3.3	1.0
Classroom interventions	2.3	2.9	0.6
Monitor interventions	1.8	2.8	0.9
Results Oriented Planning	**2.6**	**3.4**	**0.8**
Use of assessment data	2.8	3.7	0.8
Backwards planning towards standards	2.7	3.7	1.0
Clear objectives	2.7	3.3	0.6
Plan to assess student learning	2.6	3.3	0.7
Plan lesson delivery	2.3	3.1	0.8