INTERVENTION FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:
Site Work Progress Report for 2004

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FOREWORD

Schools are in the midst of serious reform as they attempt to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act and make adjustments that will positively impact students' academic lives. Yet, to accomplish these outcomes, schools need help, and state departments of education and local school districts are obligated to provide such assistance. Indeed, these entities want to help schools succeed, but formal and informal needs assessments indicate that some state education agencies and districts have limited capacity to support the efforts of low-performing schools.

To address this problem, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) developed an intervention, called the McREL Approach, for assisting schools with their efforts to improve student achievement. This report documents progress in pilot testing of the intervention in two states in the Central Region from January 2002 through April 2004. The audience for this report is McREL's sponsors and other researchers; the report is not intended for practitioners at this point.

The report begins with an overview of the McREL Approach. The remaining chapters provide examples of how elements of the Approach have been pilot-tested with school leadership teams in 12 sites. These examples illustrate the content and nature of the work that occurs in the various stages of the Approach and lessons learned about tools and strategies used in each stage. The report concludes with a chapter on next steps for development and field testing of the Approach.

No Child Left Behind has required — and inspired — many people inside and outside education to focus on improving low-performing schools. But improving low-performing schools is a complex undertaking. This report documents McREL's efforts to pilot test the elements of an intervention that will help service providers assist schools in dealing with that complexity. The chapters that follow lay the foundation and provide a focus for further development and field testing of the McREL Approach, ultimately enhancing its effectiveness.

CHAPTER 1
THE McREL APPROACH: A FRAMEWORK FOR McREL'S SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT WORK

The school improvement intervention McREL uses in its work with schools is based on research and best practice related to change, organizational development, leadership, and school effectiveness. This intervention, referred to as the McREL Approach, is a seven-stage process that facilitates the development of a data-driven, standards-based education system and a professional learning community characterized by collegiality and collaboration. This comprehensive, long-term process involves development of a customized plan that builds the capacity of school and district staff to sustain improvement efforts for the long term.

The McREL Approach is built on the premise that individuals have the ability and will to learn what is necessary to improve student performance and that improvement efforts should build on the strengths of individuals and programs rather than focus solely on weaknesses. These ideas are reflected in the stages of the McREL Approach and in the theory of change and theory of action embedded in it. This chapter provides brief descriptions of these aspects of the Approach. More complete descriptions are provided in *The McREL Approach to Improving Schooling and Its Outcomes* (Dean, 2004).

STAGES OF THE McREL APPROACH

The McREL Approach includes seven stages during which McREL consultants serve a variety of roles. The seven stages of the McREL Approach are interrelated and can be clustered into four categories: (1) building relationships, (2) taking action, (3) assessing progress, and (4) transferring leadership. These categories and the interrelationships among stages are depicted in Exhibit 1.

The descriptions that follow explain the goals and types of activities that occur during each stage of the McREL Approach; the stages are named to capture the actions carried out by McREL staff working with schools. Although each stage involves realizing particular goals, it is not imperative that one stage be completed before another stage begins. The stages vary in length, and progress within a stage may not be linear. Reflecting the complexity of the school change process, the length of a particular stage is not fixed.

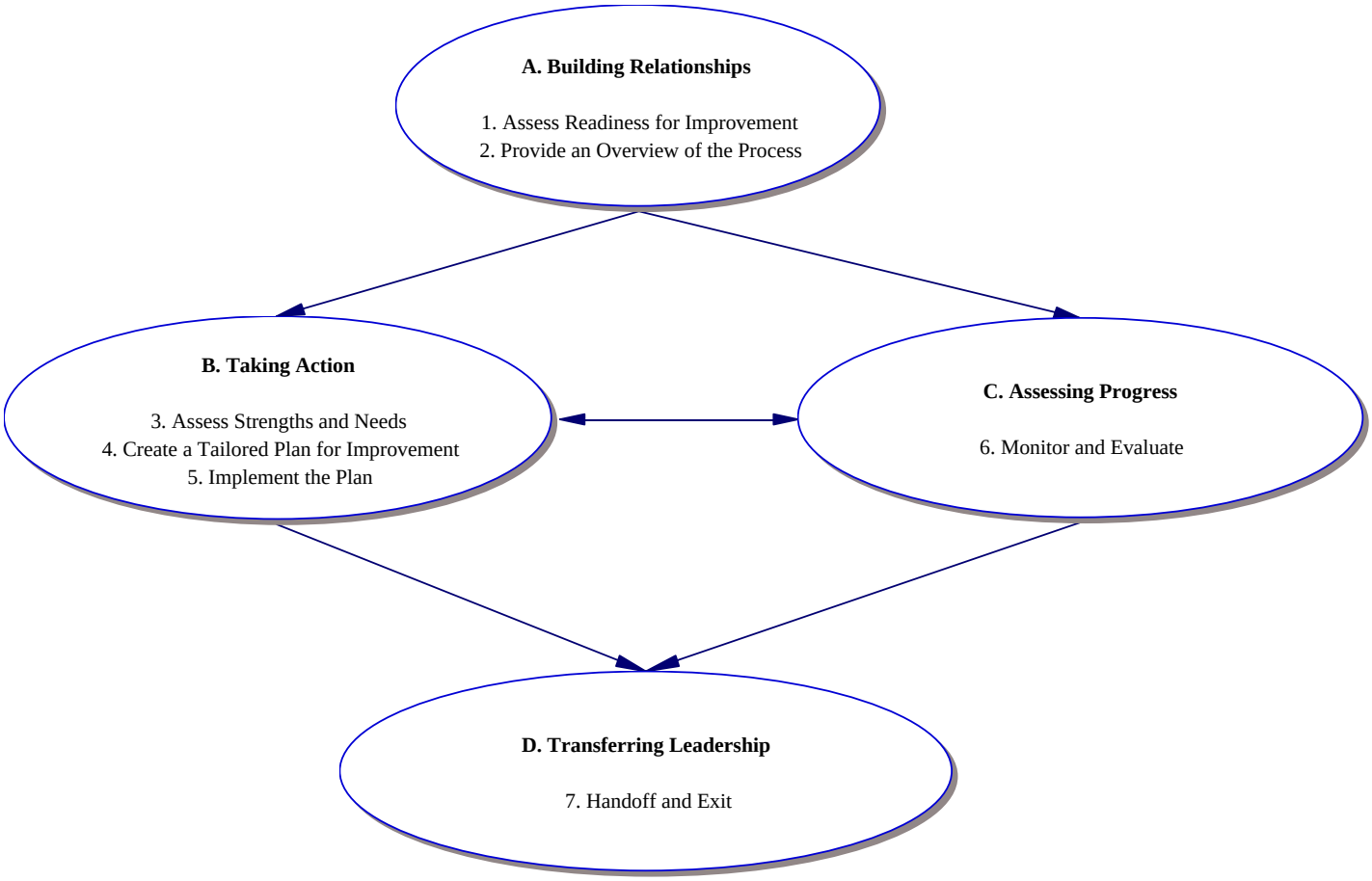

Exhibit 1. The McREL Approach

STAGE 1: ASSESS READINESS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The goal of Stage 1 is to gather background information about the facts and dynamics that led to the request for assistance with improvement, the nature and extent of current initiatives in the school, and how current initiatives build on past initiatives. This stage includes determining who is leading the change effort and the strength of their commitment to change as well as the commitment of other staff members. The readiness assessment also examines the resources that are available and the structures that are in place to support change. Relationship building begins in this stage and expands considerably in Stage 2.

STAGE 2: PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

In Stage 2, the McREL consultant explains the overall intervention process, stages of the McREL Approach, content that serves as the basis for designing the site-specific implementation plan, and the collaborative nature of the partnership. The focus is on building relationships among the parties, clarifying expectations and outcomes, and detailing the roles and responsibilities of all involved.

STAGE 3: ASSESS STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

Data is the key word for Stage 3 of the McREL Approach. McREL consultants focus on collecting information about the demographics of the site, student performance, and the status of the site in terms of organizational development and the use of effective school and teacher practices. Data collection may occur formally through surveys, interviews, and observations or informally through conversations with key leaders and review of data provided by the client.

STAGE 4: CREATE A TAILORED PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT

The purpose of Stage 4 is to define the content and process elements of the work. During this stage, McREL and school staff members work collaboratively to create a tailored plan for improvement. This includes defining goals for the work and establishing progress and outcome measures, including short- and long-term changes that will result from the work. It also includes identifying the specific issues that will be the focus of the work, for example changes in practice that might need to occur. Collaborative decisions also are made about how goals will be accomplished. For example, on-site, monthly book study groups or online discussion groups might be established for school staff to learn about effective teacher, leadership, and schoolwide practices. Regular meetings between McREL consultants and school leaders might be scheduled to learn about the elements of a professional learning community and how to take actions to establish one in the school.

Part of developing the plan for improvement is deciding how the work will be monitored, adjusted, and evaluated. The plan establishes checkpoints for collecting and analyzing data, defines measures and expected progress at these checkpoints, and identifies data sources. The plan also outlines how data will be collected, analyzed, reported, and used to make adjustments.

STAGE 5: IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

Stage 5 of the McREL Approach is the heart of the work. During this stage, school leaders begin to put the plan for improvement into action. This stage is characterized by individual and collective learning of knowledge and skills related to leadership, instruction, curriculum, professional development, and a host of other topics that depend on the pre-existing conditions (e.g., working relationships among staff members, policies that support collaborative work, data analysis skills) in the site. This learning is dependent on a high level of rapport and trust between McREL consultants and key school leaders — and between school leaders and their staff.

STAGE 6: MONITOR AND EVALUATE

Stage 6 of the McREL Approach addresses an area that is critical to the health of systems — feedback. During this stage, McREL staff members assist clients in carrying out the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes outlined in the improvement plan developed in Stage 4. McREL staff members also help clients determine whether feedback is being used effectively for system improvement and whether the monitoring and evaluation system needs to be refined.

STAGE 7: HAND-OFF AND EXIT

One of the purposes of the McREL Approach is to build the capacity of school staff members to sustain improvement. McREL consultants work toward this goal throughout the various stages, but in Stage 7, deliberate actions are taken to help school staff members focus specifically on the elements of sustainability and assess the extent to which they have addressed these elements. School staff members use the results of this assessment to develop a plan that ensures that they have the appropriate structures and processes in place for sustainability.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The theory of change that guides McREL's school improvement intervention draws from the work of several change theorists (e.g., Bridges, 1991; Fullan, 1993; Kanter, 1985; Rogers, 1995). The first aspect of this theory relates to change itself. McREL's theory of change posits that not all change is the same — that change varies in terms of its magnitude and its implications. This view differs from common understandings of change in that it recognizes the differing ways in which change affects different stakeholders. In general, change might be considered to be first order when most stakeholders view the change as a continuation of the past and generally in line with their existing perspectives. Conversely, change might be considered to be second order when most stakeholders view the change as a break with the past and in conflict with their existing perspectives.

Change is considered to have first-order implications when stakeholders agree on the importance of a change effort, can implement it with existing knowledge and skills, believe it is consistent with their prevailing values and norms, and have sufficient resources and motivation to implement the change.

First-order change is sometimes referred to as technical (Heifetz, 1994) or incremental (Beckard & Pritchard, 1992) change. In the case of second-order change, neither the change that is needed nor the way to bring about the change is readily apparent. There is conflict between the change and various stakeholders' norms and values, and stakeholders must learn new knowledge and skills and how to work collectively and collaboratively. Second-order change also is known as adaptive (Heifetz, 1994) or fundamental (Beckard & Pritchard, 1992) change. Exhibit 2 presents a summary of the characteristics of first- and second-order change.

Exhibit 2. Characteristics of Change with First- and Second-Order Implications

First-Order Change	Second-Order Change
• An extension of the past • Within existing paradigms • Consistent with prevailing norms and values • Incremental • Linear • Implemented with existing knowledge and skills • Implemented by experts	• A break with the past • Outside of existing paradigms • Conflicts with prevailing norms and values • Complex • Nonlinear • Requires new knowledge and skills • Implemented by stakeholders

McREL's theory of change also incorporates concepts from institutional theory, including organizational memory and organizational learning (Hanson, 2001). The theory of

change also reflects a living systems view of organizations (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). This view focuses on the organization as a whole and the interactions among the parts or aspects of the organizations. Living systems theory emphasizes that for a living system to thrive, it must (1) be clear about its identity (i.e., its purpose, values, core beliefs, competencies, principles, traditions); (2) maximize the flow of information among all members of the system; and (3) foster honest and open communication and treat diverging views as opportunities for learning and growth (Baird-Wilkerson, 2003). Because the theory of change embedded in the McREL Approach incorporates such concepts from institutional theory and living systems theory, the McREL Approach supports schools in becoming dynamic, adaptable, sustainable, and coherent organizations.

THEORY OF ACTION

McREL's theory of action for its work in schools (see Exhibit 3) assumes that improving student achievement for all students is a task that cannot be accomplished by the principal alone. To accomplish the task, the principal must share leadership for improvement with other staff members. This belief is reflected in McREL's focus on working with school leadership teams to increase their capacity to lead school improvement.

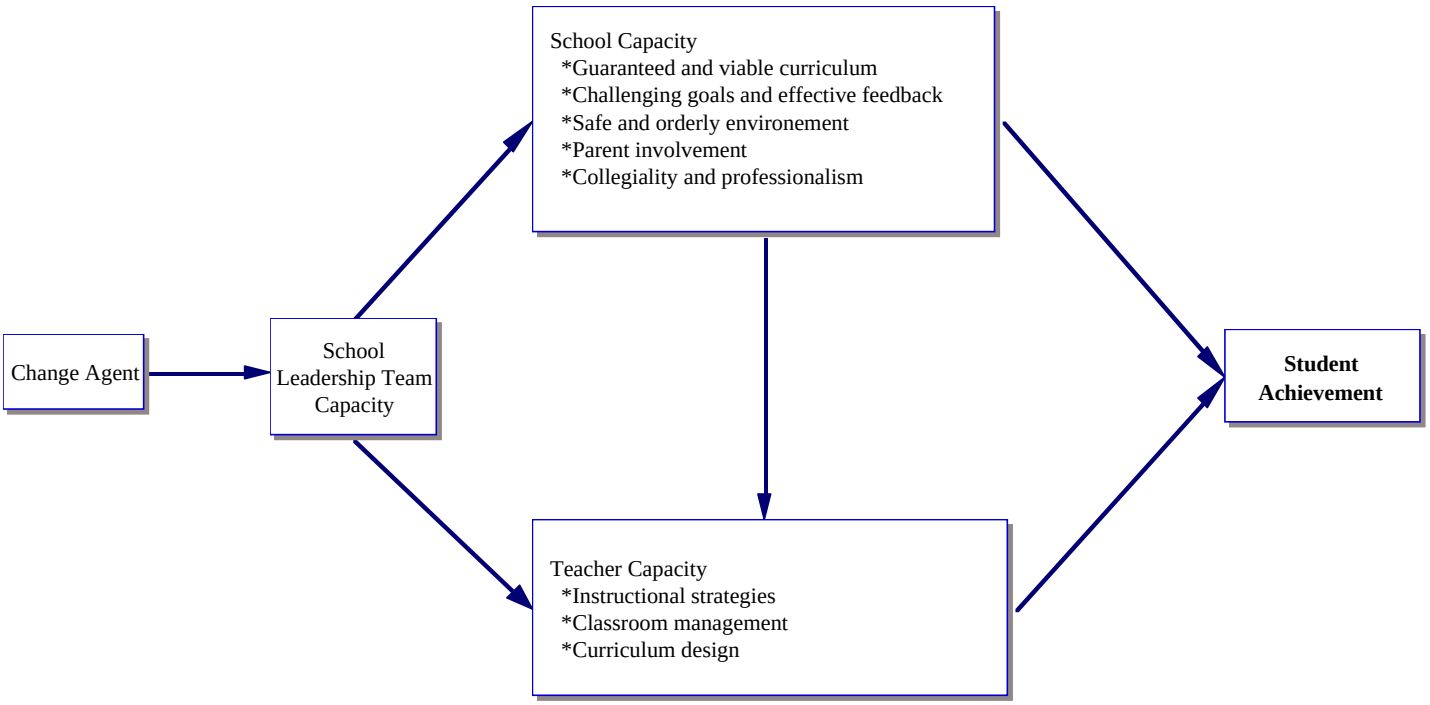

Exhibit 3. McREL's Theory of Action

Leading school improvement involves focusing efforts on the school-level and teacher-level factors that influence student achievement (Marzano, 2000). These factors are included under school capacity and teacher capacity, respectively, in Exhibit 3. The theory of action is built on the premise that leadership team members increase their individual capacity for improving instruction through their work on the team. In addition, as they work with other

teachers on grade-level or cross-grade-level teams, leadership team members increase the capacity of other individual teachers and the staff as a whole to improve instruction. This increased school capacity and individual teacher capacity are mutually reinforcing and lead to the ultimate goal of improved student achievement. As shown in Exhibit 3, the theory of action also includes the assumption that internal or external change agents can assist school teams in building capacity for improvement (Hall & Hord, 1987; Havelock & Zlotolow, 1995).

SUMMARY

This chapter presented an overview of the McREL Approach, McREL's intervention for assisting schools with their school improvement efforts. The chapter included a brief description of the seven stages of the McREL Approach, highlighting the goals and purpose of each stage. The chapter also included descriptions of the theory of change and the theory of action that are embedded within the McREL Approach. The theory of change notes the importance of viewing the school as a living system. The theory of action emphasizes that the work of the school leadership team should focus on the factors that research has shown are correlated with improved student achievement.

CHAPTER 2
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter illustrates how McREL consultants pilot-tested tools and strategies for Stages 1 and 2 of the McREL Approach — Assess Readiness for Change, and Provide an Overview of the Process. Together, these stages make up the Building Relationships Phase of McREL's work with 12 school sites in the Central Region[1]. McREL's intervention with low-performing schools begins with activities designed to build the relationships needed for McREL consultants and school staff members to work collaboratively. Although the process of building relationships is emphasized in the first two stages of the McREL Approach, building relationships is an integral part of the entire school intervention process. Relationship building is particularly important in the first stages, however, because it is during this time that expectations for both school staff members and McREL consultants are communicated, laying the foundation for the future phases of the work.

The chapter begins with an explanation of how McREL assesses readiness for improvement, using selection of the sites in State A and State B as an illustration. This explanation is followed by a description of how McREL staff members provide clients with an overview of McREL's school improvement intervention process and communicate with clients about roles and responsibilities of all involved. This aspect of the McREL Approach is illustrated by providing details about development of the leadership teams in the 12 Central Region sites.

STAGE 1: ASSESS READINESS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The primary goal of Stage 1 is to determine a site's readiness to engage in the school improvement process. During this stage, McREL staff members determine who is leading the change effort and evaluate the level of commitment to the change effort among site leaders and other site staff members. This also is a time for gathering information about the resources and infrastructure available to support the change. Attending to these types of details helps McREL consultants understand why a school wants to make changes and ensures that a critical mass of the school's staff is willing to engage in the change process. The McREL Approach is customized to meet the specific needs of a site, but without sufficient participation from the staff or attention to the infrastructure needed to be successful, even a customized approach will not achieve the desired level of success.

SELECT SITES

A needs assessment conducted in 2000 indicated that some states in the Central Region had limited capacity to support the efforts of low-performing schools. To address this problem, McREL designed a project to develop and pilot-test an intervention that external change agents (e.g., McREL staff, intermediate service agency staff, state education agency staff) could use to assist low-performing schools with their improvement efforts. In early 2001, McREL presented

[1] The Central Region is comprised of seven states: Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

information about the project to the chief state school officers in the Central Region states and invited them to participate in the project. The chief state school officers from two states (hereinafter referred to as State A and State B) indicated strong interest in the project. Subsequently, meetings were held with key state education agency (SEA) staff in spring 2001 to explain the project and plan ways in which to involve local districts and schools.

The SEA in State A decided that McREL should test its intervention in the schools the state had designated as "school improvement" schools. The schools had earned this designation because they had not made adequate yearly progress under Title I regulations. State A SEA staff and McREL staff agreed that in addition to providing an opportunity to pilot-test elements of the McREL Approach, work in the sites should help the state better understand the needs of low-performing schools and how SEA policies and practices affect the improvement efforts of those schools. The SEA in State B decided that McREL should work with the low-performing schools in urban districts. The chief state school officer recommended two districts.

In fall 2001, McREL staff members made a presentation to State A's 14 "school improvement" schools and invited them to participate in the project. Eight schools completed applications and participated in on-site interviews conducted by McREL staff. To gauge their level of commitment to participate in the project, support for change, and experience with change, schools were asked to include the following items as part of the application process:

- A needs assessment form
- A statement detailing the reasons that the school wanted to participate in the project
- A description of school priorities or needs and details about strategies that had been used to address these needs
- A description of how the school leadership team members were selected
- A brief description of what each team member would contribute to the team
- A written statement from each member of the team stating why he or she wanted to be part of the team
- A copy of the school improvement plan (or Title I application if no school improvement plan)

A rubric was developed to evaluate the applications against a set of criteria. These criteria addressed (1) existence of shared purpose and goals, (2) experience and culture to support change efforts (e.g., planning, dealing with conflict), (3) use of a structured process to articulate needs and identify strategies to address those needs, (4) district support (e.g., assistance with planning, professional development, data analysis), (5) allocation of resources to support staff members' participation in the project, (6) commitment and willingness to address issues, and (7) leadership team members' commitment to the project. Eight schools scored high enough on the evaluation of their applications to receive site visits.

On-site interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents were designed to gather information related to the selection criteria. Interview questions addressed the school's

experiences with change (both the type of change and the success of the change effort), how staff members dealt with conflict, priority needs, the school's professional development program, level of support among staff for participating in the project, and staff members' attitude toward working with an external change agent.

Four schools, representing three districts, were selected through this process: two elementary schools, one middle school, and one K–8 school. All of the schools are rural, serve high-poverty and/or diverse populations, and have limited access to resources. Demographic information about these schools is provided in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4. School Improvement Sites – State A

Schools	Demographics
Rural Elementary A	180 students 99% White 1% All others 23% free/reduced-price lunch
Rural Elementary B	180 students 2% Native American 98% White 49% free/reduced-price lunch
Rural Middle School	100 students 1% Asian 1% Hispanic 2% Native American 96% White 47% free/reduced-price lunch
Rural K–8 School	100 students 100% Native American 96% free/reduced-price lunch

In State B, McREL staff members met with representatives from the two urban districts recommended by the chief state school officer and made presentations about McREL's work with low-performing schools. Leaders from one of the two districts indicated interest in the project. This district is mid-sized, serving approximately 50,000 students. In addition, the district's student population is diverse — 8 percent of its students are Native American or Asian; 18 percent, Hispanic; 24 percent, African American; and 50 percent, White. Many of the district's students (61%) are economically disadvantaged.

District leaders and McREL staff participated in several follow-up conference calls to clarify how McREL might work with the district and to provide additional information about the district's needs. McREL staff members asked questions to determine the change initiatives that were underway in the district and progress with those initiatives, level of commitment of the district leadership team, and priority needs. As a result of these conversations, district leaders decided that McREL could best support the district's efforts to help low-performing schools by working with the district leadership team to ensure that all teachers were effectively teaching to and assessing standards.

McREL staff visited the district in October 2001 to conduct interviews with principals and teachers to determine the extent and possible causes of the lack of standards implementation at the classroom level. In December 2001, McREL staff reported the findings from the interviews and presented recommendations for next steps in the project. During the remainder of the 2001–2002 school year, McREL's work with the district leadership team focused primarily on developing a standards implementation plan and designing professional development opportunities for principals that would help them lead the standards implementation process in their schools.

In summer 2002, the district leadership team expanded its work with McREL to include exploration of the district's policies and practices related to school improvement planning. The team acknowledged that the planning process was burdensome and had little meaning for schools — especially poor-performing schools that struggled to use their school improvement plans to guide instructional practice and professional development.

As a result of these discussions, the team decided that it was time for McREL to work directly with a group of low-performing schools in the district. District leaders wanted the work to establish "models" of how schools can use school leadership teams to lead the development and implementation of school improvement plans and improve student achievement. The team selected five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school to participate in the project. McREL staff began monthly meetings with leadership teams in these schools in January 2003. Exhibit 5 provides demographic data for the participating schools in State B.

The explanation of how these sites were selected provides two examples of how McREL evaluates a site's readiness to work with service providers on systemic school improvement. As school staff members, district-level personnel, and SEA representatives shared the challenges that they face while attempting to improve student learning, McREL staff members listened for indicators that participants were committed to engaging in the change process, personally and organizationally. Strategies included conducting formal and informal interviews by phone and in person and asking sites to complete a variety of forms that asked for information about commitment to working with McREL, experiences with change efforts, available resources, planning processes, and other aspects of school improvement. The site-selection process highlights a school, district, or SEA's commitment to change organizational structures and to use instructional practices that research shows are likely to increase student achievement.

Exhibit 5. School Improvement Sites – State B

Schools	Number of Students & Percentage Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	Ethnic Make-up
Urban Elementary A	384 students 80% free/reduced-price lunch	58% African American 1% Asian/Pacific Islander 5% Hispanic 2% Native American 34% White
Urban Elementary B	588 students 84% free/reduced-price lunch	23% African American 27% Hispanic 33% White 17% Other

Schools	Number of Students & Percentage Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	Ethnic Make-up
Urban Elementary C	481 students 85% free/reduced-price lunch	17% African American 15% Asian/Pacific Islander 46% Hispanic 22% White
Urban Elementary D	450 students 82% free/reduced-price lunch	30% African American 7% Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American 10% Hispanic 53% White
Urban Elementary E	360 students 87% free/reduced-price lunch	35% African American 14% Hispanic 3% Native American 48% White
Urban Middle A	804 students 79% free/reduced-price lunch	12% Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American 32% African American 25% Hispanic 31% White
Urban Middle B	538 students 78% free/reduced-price lunch	9% Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American 30% African American 20% Hispanic 41% White
Urban High A	1,684 students 53% free/reduced-price lunch	5% Asian/Pacific Islander 19% African American 11% Hispanic 3% Native American 62% White

LESSONS LEARNED: ASSESS READINESS FOR IMPROVEMENT

McREL staff members learned several important lessons about working with low-performing schools in the first stage of the McREL Approach, Assess Readiness for Improvement. These lessons relate to gathering information from teams about their capacity and willingness to participate in change efforts.

Lesson 1: Schedule on-site interviews to gather accurate information about readiness for change. McREL consultants designed or adapted several forms to solicit information from leadership teams during the site selection process. The expectation was that teams would work together to complete the forms. In most cases, however, on-site interviews made it clear that the forms had been completed by the principal with little or no input from other team members. Similarly, all of the teams submitted forms that indicated there was strong support among all staff members for the school's participation in the project. In some cases, on-site interviews

painted a different picture. Many teachers did not know about the project, or they were given no choice about participating.

Lesson 2: Ensure that tools for gathering information are simple and in formats that can adequately capture potential participants' levels of knowledge, skills, and experience. Several forms were used to gather information from the sites in State A; some of these forms were quite lengthy and asked for many details. Many of the sites had difficulty completing the forms; in some cases they provided information unrelated to the questions asked. On-site interviews revealed that those who had completed the form did not understand the question. In other cases, the format of the question did not permit respondents to adequately demonstrate what they did and did not understand about the change process and school improvement. As a result, McREL staff thought the teams had more experience with change and school improvement than was actually the case. Using a different format, for example asking site leaders to react to a vignette about a school engaged in change, might help reveal more accurate information about how decisions are made in the school and how the staff works together to accomplish change.

STAGE 2: PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

During this stage of McREL's work with schools, McREL clarifies expectations and details the roles and responsibilities of all involved. The goal of this stage is to highlight the multiple steps that are involved when schools engage in a school improvement process with the assistance of an external agent. During this stage of the approach, McREL consultants continue to build relationships. A strong relationship between service provider and the school staff creates the conditions necessary to openly discuss important issues as they arise.

When McREL starts to work with individual schools, one of the first exercises is to review the school improvement process and to identify the assistance that McREL will provide to the school staff as the staff begins the improvement process. When the intensive site work began in State A, McREL staff members presented a diagram of the school improvement process. Like the McREL Approach, the process shared with the sites includes seven steps: (1) preparation, (2) comprehensive needs assessment, (3) schoolwide plan development, (4) review and refinement of the plan, (5) implementation, (6) ongoing program development, and (7) plan revision. Each step is further defined by action steps.

Based on experiences in State A, McREL staff members modified the diagram of the school improvement process by adding an outer ring labeled "culture." With this modification (see Exhibit 6), the diagram more accurately reflects the role of school culture in the school improvement process.

This diagram provided a way for teams to think about the school improvement process, but it did not help teams understand the "big picture" of McREL's work with them. To address this issue, McREL staff members created the diagram presented as Exhibit 7. This diagram is used to explain that the team's work with McREL involves assessing and addressing a number of factors that lead to the ultimate goal of increased student achievement — among them, school, teacher, and student factors; organizational development; and leadership. Using this diagram helps set the stage for conversations about the leadership team's role and responsibilities.

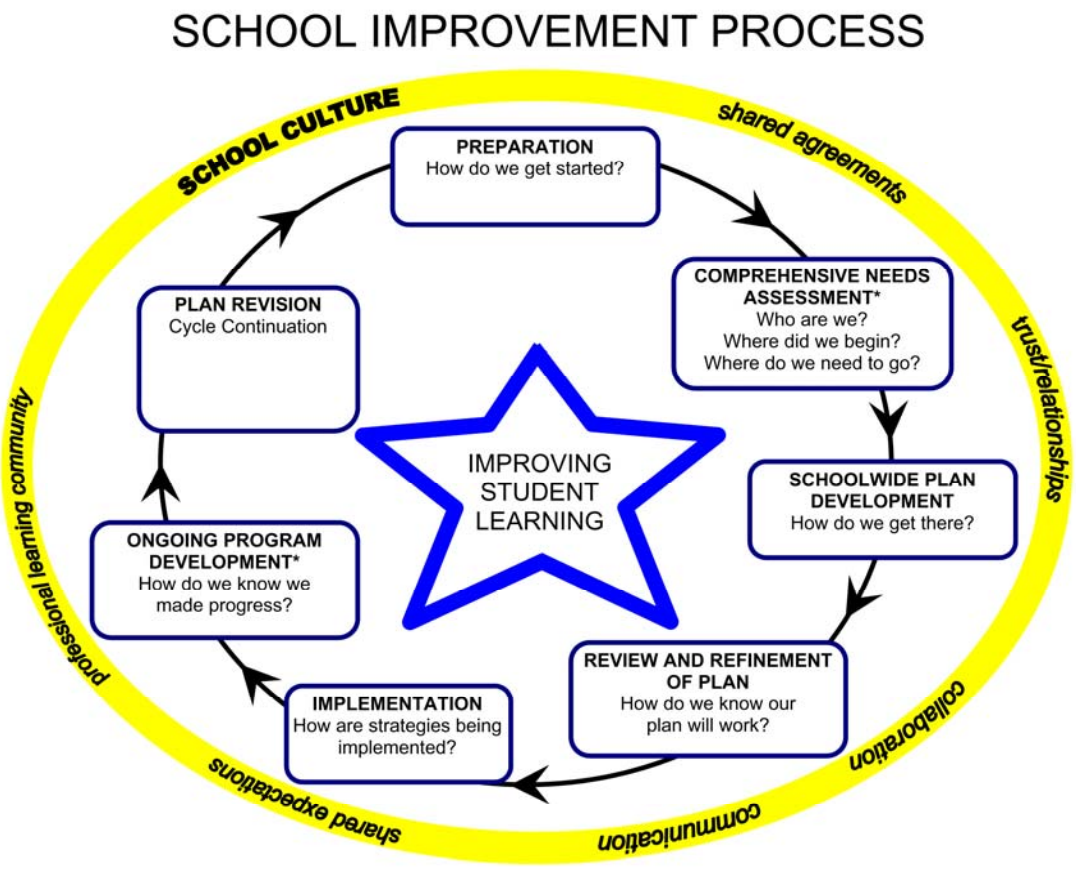

Exhibit 6. The School Improvement Process

McREL staff members explain each aspect of the diagram, emphasizing that an important focus of the work will be the professional culture of the school because professional culture can be a major barrier to addressing other factors that affect student achievement. As shown in Exhibit 7, these barriers include teacher and administrator attitudes and beliefs about their roles (e.g., administrators lead and teachers follow, teachers are "born" not "developed") and past experience with changes that did not make a difference in teaching or learning. Additional barriers include a focus on inputs rather than results and a focus on individual efforts rather than school-wide efforts (teacher isolation and "private practice," lack of communication, individual goals).

McREL consultants explain that as school staff members work to become a professional learning community, they develop skills of collaboration, reflection, and inquiry, which increases their ability to identify and solve "adaptive" problems — those for which the solutions are not readily apparent and collective learning and collaborative work are required (Heifetz, 1994). The graphic emphasizes that culture must be addressed for adaptive or second-order change to occur.

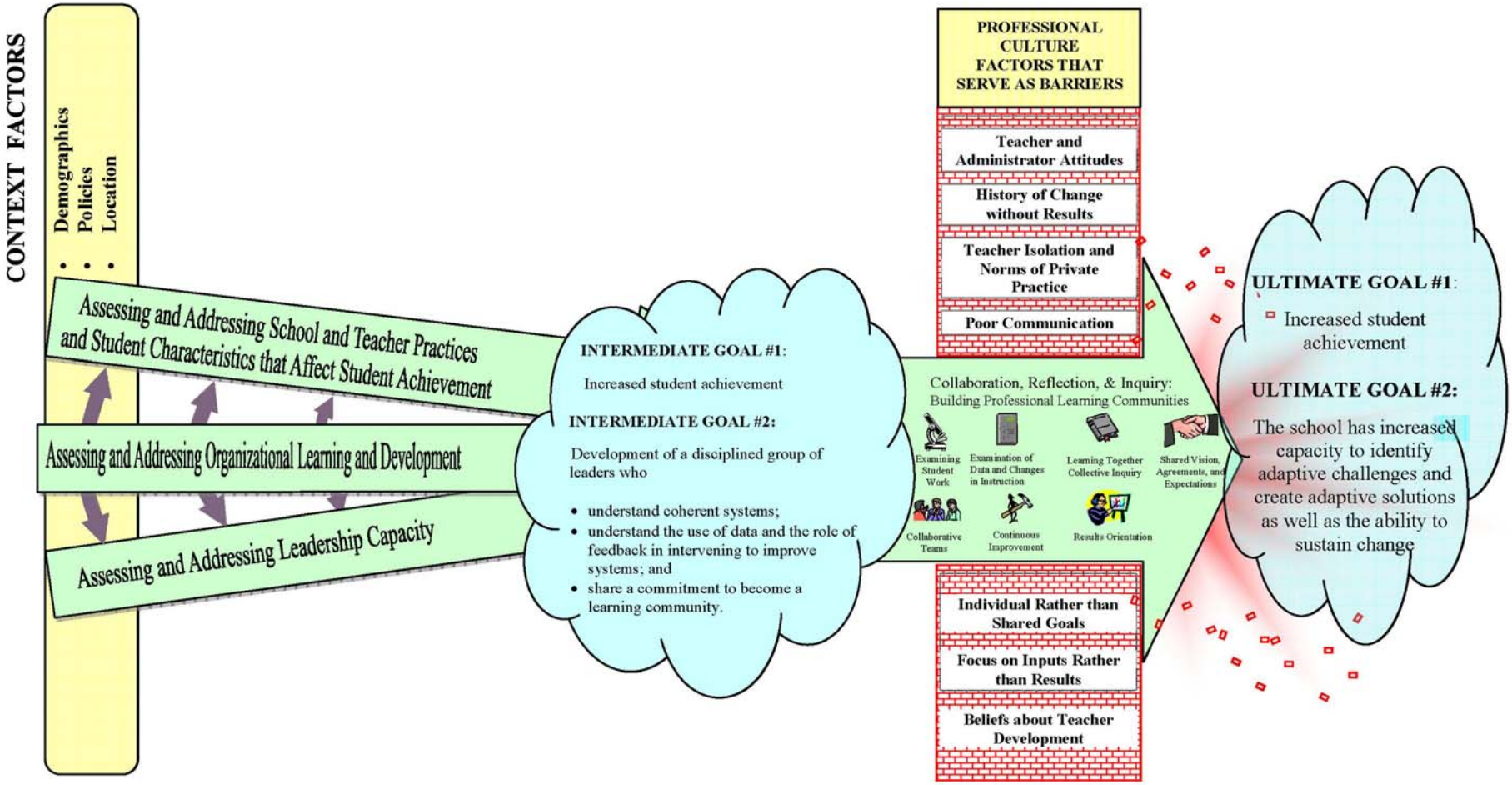

Exhibit 7. McREL's Work with School Leadership Teams

The not-so-subtle implication is that teachers and administrators must think and act differently to meet the challenge of academic success for all students. McREL asserts that creating a professional learning community positions a school to meet this challenge. But shifting the focus of a school's approach to improvement from individual teacher practice to the collaborative efforts of a professional learning community is not easy. As DuFour and Eaker (1998) explain:

> If schools are to be transformed into learning communities, educators must be prepared first of all to acknowledge that the traditional guiding model of education is no longer relevant in a post-industrial, knowledge-based society. Second, they must embrace ideas and assumptions that are radically different than those that have guided schools in the past. (pp. 19–20)

McREL consultants explain that their role is to help the leadership team break from past practices and beliefs and shift to operating as a professional learning community — first as a team and then as leaders who develop a school-wide professional learning community.

The next section of this report explains how the leadership teams in the intensive sites were established. It also describes the methods that were used to deepen the level of understanding that leadership team members had about their roles and responsibilities in leading school improvement through establishment of a professional learning community. Examples of tools and strategies that McREL consultants used to help leadership team members build their capacity as leaders and to see the potential value in creating a professional learning community are included throughout the section.

DEVELOP LEADERSHIP TEAMS' UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

All schools engaged in this long-term work with McREL were required to create a leadership team if they did not already have one. In State A, two of the sites had newly created teams, and the third site had a team that had existed (at least in name) for a year. These schools had teams in place before McREL began to work with them because the state requires all schools labeled as in need of improvement to establish a team. In State B, although all of the schools were engaged in the district's school improvement planning process, some of the schools had "official" school improvement teams in place, but others did not. In many cases, existing teams had varied purposes, some of which were not connected to school improvement.

To help the teams see how their purpose in working with McREL might differ from what they were doing and understand why they were convened, McREL emphasized the tenets of a professional learning community. As work in the State B sites began, for example, McREL assessed leadership team members' knowledge of professional learning communities by using Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour's (2002) Professional Learning Community Continuum.

The continuum includes several categories that schools or external change agents can use to determine a site's current level of understanding about professional learning communities. Eaker et al.'s categories include descriptions of the degree to which schools establish and pursue shared values and goals, create collaborative cultures, develop partnerships with parents, and

continually review data to guide improvement efforts. The authors explain that a continuum is appropriate for determining a school's level of development as a professional learning community because a school's improvement efforts are non-linear. That is, most schools find themselves ahead on some elements of a professional learning community and behind on others. Using a continuum allows schools to highlight where they are making progress and where greater attention is needed. Use of this professional learning community continuum helped McREL staff members and leadership team members assess the degree to which a school was already engaging in practices associated with a professional learning community and where the school might gain the greatest benefit from external assistance.

Reviewing the professional learning community continuum was helpful for some school leadership teams, but other teams benefited from using less-direct methods to reflect on the level of collaborative practices evident in their schools. For example, leadership team members at Urban Elementary B[2] were shown a clip from the movie *Stand & Deliver*, which was set during the 1980s and featured math teacher Jaime Escalante. The value of showing this film was that it helped the team think about the work of school improvement and the role of individual versus collective efforts. To help everyone better understand the idea that one person cannot do all the work necessary to increase student achievement, the team engaged in a conversation around the following guiding questions:

1. What aspects of this story resonate with you as you think about what one principal or one teacher can do to increase student achievement for all students?
2. Although the story that this movie is based on took place a number of years ago, what is the same now? What's different?
3. What did you notice about how the teachers worked? What was the climate like?
4. What's different about the context of the 1980s and the context of today? How does that inform our work as a team?
5. Do you think Escalante's efforts were sustained over time? Why or why not?
6. How will this team sustain the school's improvement efforts?

This discussion was eye opening for Urban Elementary B's leadership team as they reflected on the norms of practice in their school. For instance, leadership team members shared their tendency to work independently in spite of feeling overwhelmed, and began to consider the possibilities of collaborative planning and instruction, which are key elements of a professional learning community.

These examples highlight the initial stages of developing leadership teams in State B. Events in the State A schools unfolded in a different way. State A schools initially focused on writing school improvement plans because they were under pressure to submit their plans to the

[2] See Exhibits 4 and 5 for basic demographics and statistics for the 12 field sites.

state. This scenario created challenges for the leadership teams because they had little or no experience in developing such plans and had received minimal information from the state on what was expected in the plan. To assist the teams, McREL consultants developed a template and a checklist to guide development of the plan and spent most of the first semester of meetings with the team developing the school's improvement plan. Because meetings with the teams did not begin until January, the school year was almost over by the time the plan was finished.

When teams returned in the fall, they thought their work was complete and that they no longer needed to meet. It was clear that the teams did not understand that their responsibilities encompassed much more than writing a school improvement plan. Throughout the 2002–2003 school year, the teams struggled to understand that one of their responsibilities was to develop a professional learning community. To help the four State A schools understand the characteristics and value of a professional learning community, this topic was a focus of the summer 2003 meeting of the leadership teams from the State A schools. At the meeting, the teams reviewed information about the shifts needed to become a professional learning community and ranked where their schools were (on a scale of 1 to 10) in making the various shifts. This laid the groundwork for further discussion of professional learning communities and team roles during the 2003–2004 school year.

As this example from State A illustrates, merely establishing a leadership team does not guarantee school or leadership team success. Teams in State A thought that their school improvement work ended with a completed school improvement plan. Yet once the written plan was finished, other issues arose; the same was true for the leadership teams in State B. Without attention to other actions, such as evaluating team membership, establishing procedures for changing team membership, and recognizing the team's connection to other teams in the school, leadership teams run the risk of becoming just one more ineffective group in the school. To ensure the team's viability, McREL's work also addressed these areas, which are discussed in the following sections.

Evaluate Team Membership

As Baird-Wilkerson (2003) notes, for a group to accomplish its work, the right people must be involved. For this reason, during the first year of McREL's involvement with these schools, McREL consultants helped teams review their composition. In keeping with McREL's rationale for developing a professional learning community, teams were required to have the principal serve as an active member and to select other members in ways that maximized the strength of the group. That is, by first identifying the strengths of individual team members, the leadership team could later capitalize on those strengths to accomplish its work.

One problem that plagues some school leadership teams is appearing to be an "in-group." An in-group typically is the group viewed as being in favor with the principal; people in this group tend to make decisions that are in line with the principal's recommendations. When this type of imbalance in a school community presents itself, those who believe they are part of the "out-group," or those who feel they have no say in decisions made by the school leadership team, sometimes disengage from the work and thwart the progress of the school's efforts to make changes. This particular situation occurred at one of the State B elementary schools, Urban Elementary E. Getting the existing team to see the benefit of expanding the team's membership

so that the team did not appear to be hand selected by the principal, however, took some time. McREL consultants subtly addressed the issue of team membership shortly after beginning the work in January 2003 by asking members to consider who else should be involved and if the team fairly represented the entire school.

It was not until fall 2003, however, that the team seriously considered its make-up and planned to incorporate more diverse voices. During a September 2003 site visit, McREL consultants reminded team members that how they worked together was a model for how other teachers in the school would work together. McREL staff members suggested that one way to exhibit this model was by considering the composition of the leadership team. At that point, several members expressed the belief that broadening representation on the team might help alleviate the feeling that an in-group was making decisions about the school. One team member suggested defining roles so that individuals who agreed to sign up would know their roles and responsibilities. Gradually, the team expanded to include one member from each grade level, as well as representatives from other constituent groups in the school such as paraprofessionals and "specials" groups (e.g., physical education or the arts).

This expansion was not limited to requests from existing leadership team members; as the work of the team started to seep into the daily operating procedures of the school, more teachers expressed an interest in being part of the team. More important, however, was how broadening leadership team membership gave the team more clout in the school. As some have suggested (e.g., McKeever & California School Leadership Academy, 2003), a leadership team is most effective when its members establish strong and effective relationships with the rest of the staff. By making the effort to craft a team that was more inclusive of diverse ideas, Urban Elementary E's team better positioned itself to initiate and monitor changes in the school that could positively impact student achievement.

As another example, State A Rural K–8 School's leadership team consisted of every classroom teacher and the principal. Because the school was so small — six teachers responsible for teaching all nine grades — this was a practical consideration. In this case, however, the team did not represent the range of other individuals who worked with students in the school. For one, Rural K–8 School's remote location made it difficult to schedule substitute teacher coverage for leadership team meeting dates. In addition, neither school nor district leaders wanted to assign all of the scheduled release days to work with McREL consultants. As a result, intensive site visit meetings were scheduled during the school day, and paraprofessionals assumed responsibility for classroom instruction during that time. Although not ideal, having all of the teachers on the leadership team eliminated the need to initiate a release day; however, it also limited the team's representation by excluding other school personnel who could make important contributions to the team's systemic reform efforts.

The important point about leadership team composition is to ensure that there is adequate representation. Some leadership teams will have representatives from each grade level or every discipline; others will not. Some leadership teams also will have active parent members or school board representatives, while other schools will invite representatives from outside the school to participate on other school-related teams. Regardless of the make-up, leadership teams operate best when the mix of individuals on the team adequately represents the various constituencies of the school.

Initiate New Team Members

Throughout the lifetime of a leadership team, membership changes. Sometimes members leave the team because the level of work proves too burdensome or time consuming. Sometimes they leave because personal or professional circumstances prevent participation. Regardless of the reason, initiating new team members is an ongoing task of leadership teams. When new members join, however, leadership teams often find that their progress stagnates as they attempt to bring new members up to speed.

Arbuckle and Murray (1989) suggest that when new members join, the team returns to the first stage of a four-stage teaming process. In their model, *forming* is the first level, followed by *storming*, *norming*, and *performing*. As the labels suggest, each stage represents increasing team coherence and progress. Some team members view backtracking as an impediment to their progress, but there is a positive side. When teams effectively start over, they can reflect on their progress and make mid-course corrections.

Throughout its intensive site work in both State A and State B, McREL witnessed changes in the composition of leadership teams and helped these teams negotiate this change process. For example, in fall 2003, Urban Elementary D's leadership team added six new members. This gave existing members the opportunity to revisit team norms, ground rules, and areas the team determined they could influence. Although the new team members may not have fully appreciated the thought process behind the commitments the leadership team had made previously, they were encouraged to comment on those commitments by asking clarifying questions. In the end, the new members thought that the existing commitments were appropriate and did not suggest any changes.

Run Effective Meetings

Time is precious. Effective schools know this and make every effort to understand the processes central to making the most of their time together. Although the need to learn more about how to run effective meetings varied from school to school, most of the leadership teams benefited from McREL's introduction of the topic. Using Bernhardt's (2002) *The School Portfolio Toolkit* as a guide, McREL produced materials to help teams develop norms and ground rules and learn the difference between reaching consensus and brainstorming (see Appendix C, Making the Most of Your Time Together). At Urban Elementary B, this was addressed by asking leadership team members to read information about reaching consensus and about brainstorming, and then share key points with a partner. At Rural K–8 School, the leadership team created posters to display at each meeting as a reminder of the norms they set and the ground rules they agreed to follow. Each team member was given a yellow card to raise as a signal when one of the rules or norms was violated. This allowed team members to acknowledge a violation without disrupting the progress of the meeting.

In this regard, McREL encouraged leadership teams to create norms and ground rules for their meetings and to hold one another accountable for their adherence. In addition, teams took time to understand the difference between coming to consensus and brainstorming, all of which contribute to productive meeting time (Bernhardt, 2002).

Recognize the Leadership Team's Fit in the School Structure

Janet Chrispeels and her colleagues have devoted considerable attention to the function, success, and attributes of school leadership teams through a collaboration with the California School Leadership Academy (e.g., Chrispeels, Castillo, & Brown, 2000; Chrispeels & Martin, 2002; Chrispeels, Martin, Harari, Strait, & Rodarte, 1999). Among other findings, their work highlights how important it is for a leadership team to understand how it fits in the existing structure of a school. Chrispeels and Martin (2002) advise:

> A challenge confronting leadership teams is that the reform initiatives establishing them do not start with schools as blank slates, but rather the new team must define and negotiate their role and responsibilities within existing school structures. . . . Therefore, it is important to understand how teams, whether mandated or self-determined, define their roles and responsibilities and establish their authority and power, and to identify factors that contribute to their success. (p. 328)

Heeding this advice, McREL led several leadership teams through a variety of activities to explicitly define their position and role in the school. For example, team members at Urban Elementary C participated as a group in an activity adapted from Chrispeels and Martin (2002). The point of the activity was for the team to reflect on their relationship to and communication with other teams and groups in the school community; team members created a diagram representing these relationships. At the end of the allotted time, McREL consultants asked the group to consider some of the patterns they saw on the diagram and to discuss whether the illustration was an accurate representation of relationships among the groups. The group agreed that the hierarchical nature of the diagram did not fully reflect all of the organizational relationships in the school, but the fact that the team placed itself below the federal government, the local school district, and the principal suggested that they did not see their central position in the school.

A similar exercise occurred at the two middle schools in State B. Learning from the experience at Urban Elementary C, McREL created a guide to scaffold the process. Team members created visual representations to help them understand how their team was connected to other teams at the school and to identify the implications for fulfilling the team's role in improving instruction. For this activity, team members considered the following questions:

1. How does information flow among groups?
2. Is the leadership team a subset of another team?
3. Which teams are on the same level as the leadership team?
4. What is the team's relationship to the principal?
5. What authority does the leadership team have?

Results from this activity emphasized the lack of communication among groups. The activity also revealed that there were a large number of work groups, but some were not very active or their purpose was not well known. In light of these findings, the team discussed ways to

improve communication in order to accomplish its goal and the usefulness of some of the groups. The team has referred to this activity during a number of subsequent meetings when discussing the lack of communication in the school.

TAP THE POTENTIAL OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Recognizing the potential of teacher leaders implies that a school is moving beyond viewing the principal as a heroic individual who single-handedly will fulfill the school's improvement goals; instead, leaders see the benefit of garnering the knowledge and skills of all individuals who can impact student achievement. However, getting teachers and others to acknowledge teachers' capacity for leadership can be difficult. In fact, many teachers do not see themselves as leaders despite the numerous leadership responsibilities they assume, often without hesitation. To help leadership team members, other teachers, and administrators see the leadership skills and strengths that often are overlooked, McREL guided leadership team members through several activities to "awaken the sleeping giant" of teacher leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 5). Katzenmeyer and Moller define teacher leaders as those teachers who "lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice" (p. 5).

Too often, leadership opportunities for teachers take teachers away from the classroom. However, it is in the classroom where the "rubber meets the road" with school improvement. Thus, teachers frequently are in the best position not only to understand what changes are needed, but also to carry out those changes. Yet, too often, teachers' deep knowledge of teaching and learning remains an untapped resource in school improvement efforts.

Following several site visits to Urban High A, McREL staff members introduced the concept of teacher leadership by engaging team members in an activity called Magnetic Definitions. McREL consultants passed out a list of definitions of teacher leader written by various authors over time and asked team members to talk in small groups about the definitions that "attracted" them and the ones that "repelled" them. The definitions and the team members' reactions to them served as an introduction to the concept of teacher leadership and as a way to see how the idea of teacher leadership has changed over time.

To provide a common reference point for the group's discussions, McREL offered a general definition of teacher leaders — people who engage and influence others toward improved practice. This definition concisely represents the essence of the definitions the team had previously reviewed. To further the team's thinking about teacher leaders, each team member recorded his or her assumptions about teacher leadership. As a large group, the team then generated a list and compared it to a list of assumptions gathered from the literature.

With assumptions about teacher leadership fresh in everyone's mind, McREL facilitated a discussion with the team about developing teacher leadership using a model proposed by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001). The model includes four components: (1) assessing professional values, beliefs, and behaviors about how students learn and the role of the teacher; (2) understanding the stages of change in schools; (3) influencing change by developing leadership skills; and (4) planning ways in which to use leadership skills and making a

commitment to do so. Following this discussion, leadership team members completed Katzenmeyer and Moller's teacher leadership readiness questionnaire. Then they discussed the possibility of keeping individual journals documenting their knowledge, skills, and experiences as a strategy to monitor the strengths they brought to the school and to the team's improvement efforts.

Next, the leadership team discussed the leader's role in reading, assessing, and reinforcing or transforming the school's culture and read an article entitled "What Leaders Need to Know About School Culture" (Norris, 1994). McREL explained that a sample strategy for analyzing school culture is to consider the types of conversations that take place in the school and the extent to which these conversations support or hinder a positive school environment. Team members also reviewed examples of types of teacher leaders and discussed which type seemed to best represent their individual leadership style. Finally, the team talked about the connection between teacher leadership and bringing the campus improvement plan to life.

McREL initiated a similar discussion about teacher leadership with Rural K–8 School's leadership team. Each team member first shared his or her thoughts about what teacher leadership should look like. These ideas were discussed as a group and organized into themes. Then the team identified what support teachers at the school would need to be effective teacher leaders and to fulfill the teacher leadership responsibilities previously listed. Finally, the team addressed the channels of communication needed to accomplish the work of teacher leadership and to support teacher leadership at the school. Team members used a discussion process to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to contribute ideas. At the conclusion of the meeting, the team agreed to act as teacher leaders by mentoring other teachers, trying new instructional approaches, and sharing new ideas and strategies with each other.

UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT LEADERSHIP ROLES

When McREL staff members meet with school leadership teams for the first time, they explain that the team's role is to lead school improvement and develop a professional learning community. These roles are easy to label, but they are anything but easy for leadership team members to fulfill. In part this is true because many teachers have had limited involvement in developing and implementing school improvement plans in the past. For example, they may have provided some input or feedback on a plan that the principal or a small group developed, but once the plan was finished, it received little attention. Even in schools where teachers are involved in developing the plan, often there is no systematic approach to ensuring that all teachers implement the plan.

Another reason that teams struggle to accept this role is that they lack models for effectively leading school improvement efforts. In addition, many teachers have not had the opportunity to acquire the skills they need to carry out their responsibilities on the leadership team. For example, many have limited skills in analyzing state and district assessment data or conducting meetings. On the other hand, many teachers routinely assume leadership roles in organizations outside the school. Linking leadership responsibilities in the school to similar responsibilities that team members routinely accept outside of the school setting can help. Nonetheless, it can be difficult to convince team members that they can transfer these experiences to the school setting.

Some members of leadership teams struggle to accept their leadership role because they do not want to be perceived by their colleagues as "know it alls" or as better than others. Much has been written about this dilemma in schools (e.g., Rosenholtz, 1991), and the literature on teacher leadership and professional learning communities gives concrete examples of how schools can combat this paradigm. Drawing on this work, McREL uses several strategies to help school leadership teams understand their role and responsibilities.

Providing and discussing examples of how other leadership teams organized themselves to effect change was one strategy McREL used to help teams understand their role. For example, during the second site visit to Urban Elementary D, participants were asked to think about their role by reviewing a list of potential leadership team functions and an example of how another school described their role. The group then brainstormed responses to two questions:

1. Why are we here?
2. What can we (do we want to) accomplish as a team?

Ideas were recorded, discussed, and revised as needed. The team agreed to revisit the list and modify it as they continued to identify their priority work.

Another way that McREL helped leadership teams think about their work was to provide a framework for categorizing the team's various responsibilities. Early in the work with teams, McREL consultants organized team responsibilities under the roles of steward, designer, developer, and catalyst. A description of each category follows[3].

1. *Steward* – responsibilities related to developing a shared vision and using it to guide staff's daily work; defining values, beliefs, norms, and assumptions; providing focus for the staff's efforts; protecting staff from outside influences that might inhibit progress; providing structures and resources for collaborative conversations
2. *Designer* – responsibilities related to maintaining focus on achieving desired results and on aligning instruction, assessment, and resources in ways that maximize opportunities for learning
3. *Developer* – responsibilities related to fostering a climate of ongoing learning; promoting a sense of trust within the learning community; building and maintaining relationships; and recognizing and celebrating accomplishments of the staff
4. *Catalyst* – responsibilities related to challenging nonproductive roles, behaviors, and norms; posing difficult questions that cause others to see the reality of their environment; framing issues and challenges so others can understand and respond to them in productive ways that support progress

[3] These clusters are based on early work with the leadership responsibilities identified by McREL's leadership meta-analysis (as reported in Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). As that work evolved, use of the clusters was discontinued.

> toward school improvement; and pushing the school to adapt to inevitable change

Clustering responsibilities in this way helped teams see their purpose differently and provided a common language team members could use to define their work. For example, McREL staff presented the leadership team at Urban Middle B with a self-assessment tool that listed the four leadership roles and responsibilities associated with each role. Team members used the tool to determine the extent to which they had been successful in carrying out the various actions for each role. Based on this assessment, the team selected specific items to address during the following school year to improve their performance as a leadership team.

A third strategy for helping teams understand their role is to engage them in structured conversations that expand their thinking and understanding about appropriate responsibilities given the goals they want to accomplish. This strategy was applied at Urban Elementary C by using a conversation technique called "World Café." According to Baird-Wilkerson (2003), the World Café technique provides

> an opportunity for peers to engage in shared inquiry and networking to gain a sense of common identity about the topic of discussion. The café process should elicit the group's understanding about what drives people and what they feel passionate about. (p. 17)

This strategy seemed appropriate for Urban Elementary C because the leadership team had spent several months identifying a focus area and discussing instructional coherence, but they were still struggling to understand the role they were supposed to play in the school's improvement efforts.

In a World Café, small groups are placed around tables and discuss guiding questions for a given amount of time. One person at each table agrees to serve as facilitator to field questions, ensure equal voice, and to take notes on the conversation. After a specified period of time, participants move to a new table with different individuals. The facilitators remain at their original tables to recapture the previous conversation for newcomers, who then continue the conversation for another specified amount of time. The process is repeated one or two more times, and then participants return to their original table to reflect on what they heard at the various tables. Urban Elementary C's World Café was organized around the following questions:

1. What purpose (or role) does our leadership team play in making sure that students progress toward reading proficiency next school year?
2. How will information about students flow between the rest of the staff and our team?
3. How can we (do we) create the conditions within our building that foster addressing students' progress rather than assigning blame?

Although the team did not achieve clarity about their role as a result of this session — indeed they struggled with this issue for several more months — many expressed a sense of shared responsibility at the end of the World Café session.

LESSONS LEARNED: PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

Lessons in this stage relate to helping teams understand the nature and scope of the work that they will undertake with McREL. They also address how roles and responsibilities of all involved are negotiated and communicated.

Lesson 1: Use visual representations to help teams understand the work of school improvement and their role in it. It is often difficult for team members to understand the "big picture" of the work. Good visual representations make the work more concrete and show how the elements of the work are related. These representations should be reviewed frequently and the change agent should periodically check, formally or informally, the team's understanding of the concepts included in the representation.

Lesson 2: Clearly communicate that the team's job is to lead school improvement and establish a professional learning community. It is important to repeat this often. Explicitly define with the team what leading school improvement means (e.g., the types of actions the team will need to take). Engage the team in discussions about leadership, shared leadership, and what it means to be a teacher leader. Read and discuss the characteristics of a professional learning community; if possible, visit schools that have one.

Lesson 3: Provide clear guidance on leadership team membership. Frame the conversation about team membership around the idea that it is important to include diverse views and to have the "right people at the table" to get the job done. Periodically revisit this topic. Beginning with the first meeting, encourage the team to communicate with the rest of the staff about the team's work. Provide a template for reporting on the meeting or examples of other teams' notes that have been shared with staff not on the leadership team. This helps minimize the probability that staff not on the team will view the team as "special" or their work as "secret."

Lesson 4: Discuss accountability early in the relationship. School staff members often do not have experience working with an external change agent in a long-term relationship. As a result, team members may have concerns about the relationship between the change agent and school and district leaders. To alleviate some of these concerns, it is important to discuss who is accountable to whom for what in the first few meetings with teams. For example, everyone involved should understand that the change agent and the team will hold one another accountable for following through on agreements made at each meeting.

Lesson 5: Clarify leadership roles. McREL's recent work on principal leadership (see, e.g., Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004) underscores the important role that the principal plays in the school's ability to help all students succeed. This work also highlights the fact that the job of continuous school improvement isn't the principal's alone. As a result, McREL's work with schools emphasizes both teacher and principal leadership. It is clear that maximizing the power of both of these sources of leadership requires special attention. This means that principals and teachers need to learn about one another's leadership role in supporting school improvement efforts.

Given the limited amount of professional development that most principals receive and the recentness of McREL's leadership findings, it is not surprising that few administrators are

familiar with the research on how principals influence student achievement. Most of the principals in the 12 schools that McREL worked with in States A and B had fairly traditional notions of the principal's role. These principals varied in terms of their levels of experience, knowledge, and skills; in the quality of relationships with their teachers; and in their beliefs about the role of the leadership team. McREL learned that there are many ways in which a principal with limited skills can impede the progress of a team. For example, the principal might refuse to take responsibility for problematic staffing issues, neglect to observe classroom instruction for adherence to shared agreements, and placate resistance by maintaining the status quo.

From the beginning of the work with the teams, McREL staff met separately with the principal to debrief after meetings and to plan future meetings. Principals also needed more specific support. This meant that McREL staff members might call or email the principal on a regular basis between meetings, spend more time with the principal while at the site, or provide additional resources. McREL also sponsored principals' attendance at a national leadership conference. In several cases, this conference made a significant difference in the principal's attitude toward school improvement efforts and spurred the principal to actions that led to significant changes in the school.

As stated earlier, school improvement isn't just the job of the principal. Teachers also play a key leadership role. McREL's work with teams is designed to foster teacher leadership and join it with principal leadership for the benefit of students. McREL staff were somewhat surprised by teachers' reluctance to accept a leadership role. This reluctance stemmed in part from teachers' and principals' assumptions about the other's role in the school. McREL staff learned to provide information and encourage dialogue that helped teachers and principals understand what teacher leadership entails and its potential for supporting principal leadership and ultimately student achievement. Most important, McREL staff created opportunities for teacher leaders to exhibit their potential. These occasions occurred with colleagues in the school or with individuals from other schools or districts.

CHAPTER 3
TAKING ACTION

The majority of McREL's school improvement site work relates to Stages 3, 4, and 5 of the McREL Approach: Assess Strengths and Needs, Create a Tailored Plan for Improvement, and Implement the Plan. Collectively, these stages are referred to as the Taking Action Phase. The focus for this phase of McREL's intervention is to create a plan for improvement that is tailored to meet the specific needs of the school and to put the plan into action.

Throughout this phase of the intervention, McREL staff members work with school leadership teams to assess strengths and needs, decide what content (e.g., school practices, teacher practices, leadership, organizational development, and student characteristics related to student achievement) will be addressed and how it will be addressed. In addition to selecting the content appropriate for school leadership teams, McREL consultants work with team members to identify specific goals for the work, and to establish a timeline that includes short-term and long-term benchmarks. As described in Chapter 2, the first two stages of the McREL Approach focus on building relationships. As McREL collaborates with school leadership teams to create and implement their school improvement plans, building relationships continues to be central to the work. Work in these stages overlaps with work in the first two stages as teams continue to understand and better define their roles and responsibilities related to the school's improvement efforts.

Leadership teams that successfully navigate this phase of the McREL Approach create plans that can guide their improvement efforts. In addition, team members implement the school improvement plan while strengthening the school's capacity to focus their resources on structures and practices that can increase student achievement.

STAGE 3: ASSESS STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

The third stage of the McREL Approach involves assessing the strengths and needs of a site. During this stage, data is key. Data analysis was initially a stronger focus in the State A schools than in the State B schools. This reflects the fact that the early work in State A focused on developing a school improvement plan and there were no district personnel who could provide professional development around data use. In the State B schools, district-assigned mentors worked with teams to revise their plans and analyze data at times other than when McREL met with the teams.

When McREL began working with the State A teams, the teams recently had attended a state-sponsored (and required) "data retreat" during which they learned about different types of data, how to analyze state assessment data, and how to develop improvement goals and strategies based on that data. Team members felt overwhelmed by this experience and still were unclear about how to analyze other achievement data; they also were uncertain how to interpret achievement data in light of other types of data (e.g., demographic, program, and perception data). As a result, portions of the first several meetings with the State A schools focused on helping the teams with these issues. Over the course of the work in State A, McREL conducted additional data retreats for the sites to help them deepen their understanding of how to analyze

different types of data and use data for decision making about the appropriateness of improvement goals and the effectiveness of the improvement strategies that were implemented.

In addition to using data to identify improvement goals and strategies, teams also need to know how to use data for other purposes. For example, often a necessary step in planning for improvement is making the case for change. Such was the case in Urban Elementary E. McREL helped the leadership team understand how data can serve this purpose by asking the principal to share the school's most recent student achievement data. As the presentation continued, leadership team members acknowledged their disappointment with the learning gap that persisted between different demographic groups as well as the general decline in test scores. Seeing the data displayed in comparison tables created an uncomfortable level of tension. Although uncomfortable, such tension sometimes is necessary to create demand for improvement.

In other instances, the data are less glaring but equally instructive. For example, all of the leadership teams in District B started their work with McREL by participating in an activity called "Where Are We Growing?" For the activity, leadership team members reflected on and recorded their ideas about programs, practices, and policies that were working in the school (e.g., Six-Trait Writing, monthly staff meetings, the discipline policy), where the school was struggling to make progress, and issues or areas that should be the focus of school improvement efforts. The activity served as an informal way for McREL to learn more about the school's experiences with school improvement and how staff worked together. The activity also was designed to give the team experience in gathering and analyzing perception data and in using that information for a purpose — in this case, to identify a specific focus for the team's work with McREL.

During the third stage of the McREL Approach, McREL stresses the idea that the school improvement plan should guide improvement and that the plan should identify actions and strategies over which the team has some control. To help teams understand this latter point, McREL draws on the work of Stephen Covey (1990). In the State B schools, McREL led all of the teams through an activity designed to identify pressing needs that the team has the ability to address given their role in the school. To illustrate, Urban Elementary B's leadership team categorized data they had gathered about the school's areas of strength and needs into areas that were within their circle of influence and those that were within their circle of concern (i.e., they were concerned about the issues but were not able to influence them). Leadership team members then used a consensus-building strategy to select a focus for the team's work based on the issues they believed they could influence.

LESSONS LEARNED: ASSESS STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

Lessons in this stage relate to helping teams take stock of what is going well in their school and what needs to change. This stage is often difficult for teams because they have limited experience with data and tend to feel overwhelmed by their needs. The lessons learned reflect these difficulties.

Lesson 1: Focus the leadership team's energy on the elements of school improvement that the team can influence directly. When a leadership team assesses the strengths and needs of

the school, members often direct their resources toward the needs they are concerned about but that are not under their control (e.g., students who do not get an adequate amount of sleep before coming to school). However, with McREL's assistance, teams concentrate their school improvement work on needs that the team can influence (e.g., increasing the amount of instructional time that teachers have with students or identifying instructional strategies that will increase student engagement). Focusing on those school needs that team members can directly influence directly reduces the level of anxiety about the change process. Rather than getting bogged down by the aspects of school improvement that are out of a school's control, leadership team members can galvanize their efforts around the pieces of the school improvement work that staff members *can* control.

In many cases, the parts of the school improvement work that leadership teams can influence reflect the strengths of the school. McREL consultants help teams identify their strengths through structures such as the "Where Are We Growing?" activity. For example, a school staff that is committed to serving underprivileged children can rely on this strength to bolster the school's improvement efforts.

Lesson 2: Use data to energize leadership teams. Working with leadership teams on the use of data underscored how powerful data can be in helping teams to focus their efforts. Data also make it difficult for leadership team members to deny the reality of their school's performance. In fact, learning how to analyze data was instructive for leadership team members. One even confessed her amazement:

> I hadn't realized how you could analyze data in so many ways, shapes, and forms, and how that can be used to set up a program to improve the learning of your students. Because we analyzed the data, we set up goals, made objectives under the goals, and then selected strategies. We're following those strategies as best as possible.

Like this leadership team member, McREL staff members appreciate the importance of analyzing student achievement data. But as a result of working with the leadership teams, McREL staff members have newfound appreciation for other types of data as well. In particular, McREL staff members have found that teams feel less threatened by data analysis if they start by analyzing perception data. Starting with perception data makes it easy to shift the team's attention to data about instruction and curricula.

STAGE 4: CREATE A TAILORED PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT

Stage 4 of the McREL Approach occurs at two levels. First, McREL develops a plan to systematically work with a site's leadership team. At the same time, McREL works collaboratively with the school leadership team to develop an individualized plan for improvement. The improvement plan honors the unique circumstances of each school while maintaining an overall focus on two goals: to increase student achievement and to improve the school's capacity to sustain change. This section describes how McREL creates a plan to work with individual sites and how leadership team members and McREL consultants collaborate to develop a tailored plan for improvement.

CONDUCT SITE VISITS

Site visits are conducted on a monthly basis in both states during the school year. A team of two McREL staff members is assigned to each site. Three teams are working in State A; four teams are working in State B. All of the McREL staff members who work in State A also work in State B; two additional staff members work only in State B. The pairings of McREL staff members differ in the two states to match site needs and to provide more opportunities for McREL staff to learn from one another.

In State A, site visits were conducted January 2002–May 2002, August 2002–May 2003, and August 2003–May 2004. In addition to participating in these monthly site visits, school leadership teams in State A also attended two meetings per year that included all four schools. During these meetings, McREL addressed topics of interest to all the schools. Subsequent meetings with the individual sites focused on these topics to varying degrees, depending on the needs of the site. In State B, monthly site visits were conducted from January 2003–May 2003 and August 2003–May 2004.

The length of each site visit varies depending on conditions at the site. In general, a site visit consists of a half-day meeting with the leadership team and a 30- to 60-minute debriefing meeting with the principal to review what happened during the meeting and to plan for the next meeting. Meetings with the principal also provide opportunities for McREL staff members to coach principals on such topics as working effectively with the leadership team and understanding district school improvement policies. McREL staff members also lend moral support to the principals, help them understand issues that are blocking progress, and encourage principals to take action to advance the team's work.

DEVELOP OR REFINE THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Part of the early work of planning for improvement involves helping teams acquire needed skills, such as data analysis and understanding the steps in the improvement process as well as their role in it. In addition, because planning for improvement can seem overwhelming to teams, another aspect of McREL's work with school leadership teams involves identifying a focus for the team's work and the support that is needed to carry out the work. This section addresses a number of elements of planning for improvement.

If leadership teams are going to make the types of changes that can improve student achievement, they must have a plan for doing so. Given the importance of a plan, McREL's initial work with teams focuses on developing, or reviewing, the school improvement plan. As mentioned previously, only one of the schools in State A had a school improvement plan in place when McREL began to work with the leadership teams. The first step in the other State A schools was to provide the leadership teams with a process for developing a plan. The next step was to help the teams navigate through the various stages of the planning process. Strategies for helping the teams with the process included providing templates, checklists, examples of completed plans, and self-assessment tools to structure the process; posing questions to help the team examine their current plan (if one existed) and its proposed goals, strategies, and professional development; and providing training to help teams understand how to analyze and use data.

The schools in State B had school improvement plans when McREL began working with them. Consequently, one of the first activities McREL conducted in those schools involved posing questions to guide the teams' examination of their plans. The questions helped teams determine how and to what extent the plan prioritized student learning. When Urban Middle School A's leadership team used the questions to examine their plan, they realized that their plan did not address a priority that the team had identified for its work with McREL — increasing student engagement in learning. The team decided that the other members of the faculty would benefit from learning about the process the team had engaged in with McREL and the information the team had generated as a result. The team planned to share this information at a staff meeting scheduled for the following week. They later reported that the staff used the information to revise the strategies in the plan.

Part of developing or refining a school improvement plan is ensuring that the plan will help accomplish the school's mission and that it is consistent with the school's vision. In the early stages of developing school improvement plans in State A, McREL engaged teams in an activity that asked team members to identify the key words in the mission statement and to explain what those words meant to them. This activity helped team members develop a common understanding of the mission statement and how it should be used to guide school improvement planning and implementation. The teams also were encouraged to make the mission statement visible in the school and use it as a reference point when making decisions that affect students. To help teams understand the importance of focusing mission on student learning, McREL used a video entitled "Common Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals," produced by the HOPE Foundation (2002), and an accompanying self-assessment tool and worksheet entitled "Is Your Mission Alive?" These tools helped teams understand the difference between mission and vision and reflect on the extent to which their mission was being used to guide school improvement and decision making in the school.

All of the State A and State B schools had mission statements, and some had vision statements when McREL began working with them. Although mission typically is a topic of discussion early in McREL's work with schools, discussion of vision usually comes later. In part this is because teams often are confused about the difference between mission and vision. Another reason to delay working on a vision statement is that vision statements are best developed through an inclusive process, and in the early stages of their development, teams may not have the skills or level of trust needed to facilitate the process. Further, part of the process requires making sense of a great deal of information, which some team members find tedious. They want to take action and sometimes are not willing to devote significant amounts of time to that type of work in the early stages of working as a team.

Activities in Rural Elementary B and Rural Middle provide an example of how McREL worked with a team on the vision-setting process. In this case, the process stretched over a five-month period. Admittedly, this wasn't the only task the team was working on during that time, but nonetheless, they spent a number of meetings planning how to carry out the process, gathering and synthesizing information from a variety of stakeholders, developing the vision statement from this information, gathering feedback on the statement, making revisions to the statement, and sending the statement out for one more round of feedback. When development of the vision statement was complete, the team celebrated its accomplishment but acknowledged that the real work was in making the vision come alive in the school.

McREL assisted the team with the vision-development process by providing models of vision statements, a planning template for creating a timeline of activities, and suggested steps for synthesizing the information gathered. McREL also encouraged the team throughout the process, praising them for their perseverance and providing tools to make the task easier, such as a step-by-step process for developing clear and coherent statements from the gathered information.

For a plan to be used as a guiding document, all staff members need to know what strategies are in the document and to assess their knowledge and use of those strategies. An example of how McREL helps leadership team members with this aspect of planning and implementing school improvement is provided by activities with Urban Elementary C. McREL asked Urban Elementary C's leadership team members to complete a self-assessment to rate their knowledge and use of strategies for reading instruction. After examining the results of the assessment, team members concluded that they inconsistently used the strategies listed in their school improvement plan and that expectations for the use of those strategies varied greatly within and among grade levels. Although they recognized this was an important issue for the whole staff to address, the team didn't feel comfortable confronting their colleagues about the inconsistent use of the reading strategies. To help the team take a first step toward raising this issue with their colleagues, McREL suggested that they begin by engaging the staff in a discussion about instructional coherence. McREL guided team members through a step-by-step process the team could use later with the whole staff to initiate this discussion.

LESSONS LEARNED: CREATE A TAILORED PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT

The purpose of Stage 4 of the McREL Approach, Create a Tailored Plan for Improvement, is to define the content and process elements of the improvement work. The content and process elements represent what McREL consultants will do with individual schools and what the schools will do to improve student achievement.

McREL's experiences with the sites helped staff learn about the broader impacts of the work, how to work together to carry it out, and how to learn from it. Lessons in this section relate to how McREL's presence affects sites, the benefits of change agent partner teams, how to learn from the work, and how to improve that learning.

Lesson 1: Use a team approach. In a previous section of this report, a description was provided of how external change agents test the quality of a relationship with a leadership team by taking measured risks, pushing a team just beyond its comfort zone. One of the most effective ways to mitigate the potential harm of pushing too far, too soon is for change agents to be paired to work in a site. Partners can serve as process observers, watching for nonverbal clues, attending to language use, and capturing the other subtle cues from leadership team members when pressure gets intense. By serving as process observers for one another, partners can step in when needed to soften a hard-edged message or emphasize an important one. In addition, after the meeting, it's easier to capture the events of the meeting with a partner who can help sort out which aspects of the visit were positive, which were negative, and what lessons were learned.

Sites and change agent partners also reap benefits from the diversity of skills a team of change agents can bring to the work. Forming teams comprised of members who have

complementary strengths and different kinds and levels of experience helps to maximize what the change agents can learn from one another. The leadership teams also benefit from the different personalities that different staff members bring. In general, individual leadership team members form a strong relationship with one change agent or the other based on similarities in personality, experience, or age. As mentioned previously, these relationships are important for building trust and advancing the leadership team's school improvement efforts.

Lesson 2: Simplify tasks and explain them in concrete terms. As mentioned in the descriptions of Stages 1 and 2 of the McREL Approach, before McREL begins working in field sites, staff members gather information about the site's experience with change and school leaders' willingness to engage in the change process. Generally, leadership team members indicate that they have a strong desire to engage in school improvement and can provide some examples of changes that have occurred in their schools. Nevertheless, teams rarely understand the scope and nature of the changes that may be necessary if they want all students to succeed. And when they do grasp this point, teams frequently become overwhelmed and have difficulty selecting an appropriate starting point for their work.

McREL consultants presented a school improvement process, the goals for working with the team, the possible areas of content to be addressed, and the way staff would work with the team in initial meetings with the teams. Even so, teams had difficulty understanding the big picture and their place in it. This is related to another discovery: the information that teams provided McREL often overestimated the teams' experience with school improvement and change efforts in general. This was not duplicity on their part — they simply had a different frame of reference about what is involved in school improvement. This has taught McREL staff to be much more concrete and explicit about what is involved in the steps of the school improvement process. As a result, McREL simplified the teams' work by developing templates to structure the process, providing more examples of completed plans, modeling steps of the process, dividing the process into smaller segments, and providing teams with guided practice for completing the steps.

Lesson 3: Use subtle as well as direct approaches. The catalyst/confronter role is an important one for the change agent to play. In fact, leadership team members want the change agent to play this role because it often is more acceptable for someone outside the system to raise uncomfortable issues than it is for someone inside the system to do so, especially when teams are just beginning to work together. McREL's experience with these sites indicates that in the early stages of the work with teams, it is productive to subtly raise issues through one-on-one conversations with key members of the team — those who are the opinion leaders, for example. In some cases, McREL staff members found it effective to send subtle messages by carefully choosing words to indicate actions the team should take. For example, in discussing next steps with a team, the following question might guide the discussion; "What is the *leadership team* going to do?" rather than "What is the *principal* going to do?"

Taking the subtle approach made it possible for McREL consultants to "make the invisible visible" for the teams. The "invisible" refers to issues that are known — consciously or subconsciously — to members of the group but are not openly discussed. Such issues remain hidden because they often represent conflicting values and beliefs or unproductive behaviors within the group. Part of serving in the catalyst/confronter role is knowing when it is possible to

"turn up the heat" so the group is forced to acknowledge these conflicts. As the relationship with a team develops and the level of trust increases, a more direct approach to turning up the heat can be used. We found it best to try being direct — "test the waters," so to speak — and to then evaluate how the team responded and adjust as necessary.

McREL staff members also concluded that the direct approach was necessary after a certain point because teams often were unaware of how their habits blocked their progress. We had to assume the provocateur role by naming groups' unproductive behaviors for them and asking them why they engaged in those behaviors. When the behaviors were exposed, team members were able to reflect on them and consider adjustments. Determining the right moment during which to assume the provocateur role requires the change agent to be highly attuned to the dynamics of the relationship with team members.

STAGE 5: IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

During Stage 4 of the McREL Approach, leadership team members in each school work collaboratively with McREL consultants to develop a plan for school improvement. Once the plan is created, leadership team members are responsible for putting the plan into action, Stage 5 of the approach. As stated earlier, a goal of McREL's long-term work with sites is to develop tools and strategies that help leadership teams carry out plans for improved student achievement. Toward this end, teams must improve communication, build trust, and purposefully activate their plans. This section includes an explanation of the strategies that McREL used to help teams in the 12 schools put their school improvement plans into action.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

Because communication is central to building and sustaining trust, a lack of it is one of the greatest obstacles to effective school change (Combs, Miser, & Whitaker, 1999). Regardless of the context, developing effective communication lies at the heart of any successful improvement effort. At a minimum, communication in schools must flow at two different levels — among leadership team members, and between leadership team members and the rest of the staff. As a result, McREL helps leadership team members recognize the complexity of communication and attempts to position team members to share relevant information with others not on the team and to address uncomfortable issues as they arise.

Enhance Communication Among Leadership Team Members

To increase communication among leadership team members, McREL staff used guidelines for discussions, also referred to as protocols; facilitated unstructured discussions; and engaged participants in activities to emphasize the value of communication. Each of these approaches was used throughout the two years of McREL's work with the sites.

Drawing on the work of the Colorado Critical Friends Group (2002), McREL staff used a variety of protocols that were designed to ensure that multiple voices were heard and reduce the extent to which the conversation was dominated by a few. As Colorado Critical Friends Group (2002) explains:

> It is the existence of this structure — which everyone understands and has agreed to — that permits a certain kind of conversation to occur, often a kind of conversation that people are not in the habit of having. (p. 3)

Finding a way to have the kinds of conversations that people are not in the habit of having enables team members to hear points of view and opinions that usually are not voiced in public or perhaps only "occur around the water cooler" (Baird-Wilkerson, 2003, p. 11). These types of conversations help leadership team members build the trust needed to sustain them through the difficult work ahead.

Protocols were used at most of McREL's sites. For example, McREL staff members introduced Urban Elementary E's leadership team to the "Final Word Protocol," which is designed to provide opportunities for each member of the group to participate by expressing opinions and sharing reflections. The team used the protocol to frame their discussion of an article about school improvement. Although team members found it difficult to adhere to the format, they agreed that the protocol forced participants to listen. In fact, one participant committed to taking the protocol back to her grade-level team to improve communication.

Although protocols were helpful, McREL found that in many situations it was equally effective to facilitate an open discussion and identify action steps. For example, at Urban Middle A, leadership team members divided into small groups and discussed the question, How will we make the necessary changes in communication? Each group recorded its suggestions and reported out to the whole team. There was an opportunity to ask questions of each group and to make comments about points raised. One team member typed up the notes from the discussion and distributed them to the rest of the team. The team referred to these notes several times throughout the year as they continued to discuss their problems with communication.

A third way in which McREL addressed communication among team members was to engage the team in activities that highlighted the importance of good communication to the effective functioning of the team. For example, an activity called "Pandemonium" (Ukens, 2000) was used with Urban High A's leadership team. The team was divided into two smaller groups and, unbeknownst to the other group, each group was given different directions for completing a task. As the groups worked to complete their respective tasks, they discovered that their goals conflicted. During a debriefing session about this activity with the leadership team, members discussed what it felt like to follow instructions while others were trying to do the opposite, their experiences with conflicting goals, and how the activity related to what happens in their school.

Enhance Communication Between the Leadership Team and School Staff

One of the most challenging roles facing any leadership team is effectively communicating with colleagues in a timely and meaningful way. Ideally, practicing effective communication within the leadership team will translate to effective communication with the rest of the staff. The most important point for leadership team members to keep in mind is that the rest of the staff needs to know what the leadership team is doing and be able to make suggestions that the team will seriously consider.

Making the effort to communicate with the rest of the staff pays off on two levels. First, the leadership team has a positive experience with communication, which affirms their work and gives them the energy to continue taking chances. Second, communicating with the rest of the staff makes the staff feel as though they are part of the school improvement process. To help teams increase the effectiveness of their communication with the rest of the school staff, McREL staff members (1) modeled activities that the teams could use with the rest of the staff, (2) helped teams understand how to use their mentors as liaisons to the rest of the staff, (3) raised the issue of rotating team membership, and (4) provided tools to help the team examine the effectiveness of their communication with the rest of the staff.

At most meetings, McREL engaged team members in activities to help them explore school improvement issues or learn specific strategies for facilitating conversations with their colleagues about those issues. Team members experienced these activities as participants and rehearsed how they might conduct these same activities with other staff. For example, McREL guided Urban Middle A's leadership team members through an activity that asked them to rate their school culture on 12 different elements. During a debriefing session about the activity, the team expressed how powerful the activity was and decided that it would inform the team's work if the rest of the staff engaged in the same activity during an all-staff session.

McREL staff assisted members of the leadership team in planning for this session, but members of the team facilitated the activity on their own. By providing assistance in planning before the session, McREL was able to help the team consider problems that might occur and brainstorm solutions. After the session with the whole staff, the leadership team met to debrief and identified ways they could let the staff know that the leadership team heard the suggestions they expressed during the meeting. The team distributed notes from the session and updated the staff on which issues would be addressed immediately and which issues would be addressed at a later time.

The staff expressed many positive comments about the experience to the leadership team. As a result of the session with the whole staff, the leadership team realized the importance of communicating with the rest of the staff and following through on their commitments and, in fact, acted on some of the staff's suggestions within a few days of the session. Another result was that the team agreed to meet between McREL visits, a commitment they previously had not been willing to make.

In all of the State B schools, a district-assigned mentor was a member of the leadership team. Although the mentor role included a number of responsibilities, such as providing training, connecting teachers and principals to resources, and modeling effective instructional practices, not all schools took full advantage of the services the mentors could provide. As a result, although there was the potential for the mentors to increase the effectiveness of communication between the leadership team and the staff, this potential was not always realized. To improve this situation, McREL worked with mentors to help them find their place and voice on the team.

This situation presented itself at Urban Elementary B. As the work in this school progressed, McREL staff members met informally with the mentor and talked with her about specific roles she could play on the team to become more actively involved in the team's work. To help her assume these roles, McREL sent her copies of all materials or resources used during

site visit meetings. When leadership team members wanted to access the resources, they were instructed to contact the mentor. Establishing this line of communication helped leadership team members increase their contact with the mentor. As a result of the regular contact with the mentor and her responsiveness, team members started to call her as other needs arose.

Periodically changing the membership of the team is another way to increase communication between the team and the rest of the staff. As new members join the team, the number of staff members who understand the work of the team increases. Former members of the team, although perhaps not as directly involved as they previously were, are likely to continue to communicate with current members, inquiring about the progress of the work, assisting the team, or offering suggestions about issues the team should address. Although some of the teams in the State A and State B schools decided on their own to rotate membership, other teams needed encouragement to consider this option. In those cases, McREL staff encouraged leadership teams to think about rotating membership by explicitly raising the issue and asking teams to think about appropriate ways to select new members and the advantages of doing so.

McREL also helps teams improve communication by providing tools that teams can use to examine the effectiveness of their communication. For example, McREL developed two surveys to help Urban Elementary E's team see the discrepancy between what they thought they had communicated to the staff and how the staff interpreted the messages they received from the leadership team. Recognizing this discrepancy propelled the team to action as they reflected on the implicit messages they were sending to the staff. As a result, they committed to monitoring their language and actions about school improvement.

BUILD AND SUSTAIN TRUST

Trust is arguably the most important, but frequently the most neglected, aspect of school reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Building trust was a significant focus of McREL's work with the school leadership teams for two reasons. For one, team members must engage in honest and frank discussions about closely held beliefs as they ponder and initiate change. Without trust, team members aren't likely to have these kinds of discussions. Likewise, in order for the external agent to be able to make the kinds of suggestions that will advance the team's work and for the team to receive these suggestions as intended, there must be a significant level of trust. Recognizing trust issues is important if the team is to make progress. McREL underscores these issues by helping school leadership teams understand the significance of culture, by demonstrating effective collaboration, and by celebrating progress toward goals.

Understand the Significance of Culture

Culture refers to how individuals in schools interact with each other professionally. Schools often underestimate the importance of culture, but as noted in McREL's school effectiveness research (Marzano, 2000), attention to school culture can enhance a school's ability to improve student achievement. By focusing on collegiality and professionalism, for example, schools can increase their level of collaboration, which is an essential aspect of a professional learning community.

To highlight the significance of school culture, McREL consultants model activities to review the role of history in the school's culture and provides information to identify shared agreements and associated behaviors. For example, a *mapping* activity, such as visually mapping an organization's history, helps leadership team members articulate past actions and decisions. By participating in this kind of activity, team members develop a common story about their school, increase understanding of the school's identity, and develop a sense of connectedness.

A visual history mapping activity adapted from Peterson and Deal (2002) was used in many of McREL's sites. Visual histories describe the different historical periods for a site (e.g., 10–20 years in five-year increments) and give leadership team members the opportunity to reflect on the impact of past decisions on current conditions. For example, by mapping key people, events, and issues over a 20-year period, Rural K–8 School's leadership team recognized that they had shifted from one math curriculum to another in a relatively short period of time. As a result of the limited amount of time devoted to a given math curriculum, neither staff members nor students gained sufficient proficiency with the curriculum materials. Leadership team members surmised that the school's indecisiveness about a math curriculum contributed to the school's lack of improvement in student achievement.

Another way in which McREL staff members address school culture is by helping leadership teams articulate their beliefs about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and other aspects of schooling. Just as avocado-green flowered wallpaper in a dated kitchen becomes invisible to the inhabitants of a house, without explicit attention to these beliefs staff members take the meaning of them for granted. To decrease the likelihood of this occurring, McREL helps leadership teams identify shared agreements that describe how staff will behave in order to put these beliefs into practice. For example, McREL introduced Urban Elementary E's leadership team to the *Dimensions of Learning* model (Marzano & Pickering, 1997), a comprehensive model of learning encompassing five "dimensions" of learning. They also reviewed several rubrics from *Enhancing Professional Practice* (Danielson, 1996). Both of these resources describe characteristics of effective classroom environments. Leadership team members used these resources to create a list of shared agreements to exemplify the school's core beliefs. For example, the staff at Urban Elementary E agreed to use encouraging language, rather than sarcastic language, with students.

Collaborate Effectively

Another aspect of building trust is the ability to collaborate effectively. In the early stages of the work with teams, McREL's efforts focus on helping teams gain skill in working as a team. This is done in the context of deepening team members' understanding of the school improvement process and their role in that process. Later the focus shifts to helping the team work collaboratively on core issues such as effective instructional practices and using data to support instructional decisions. To help teams learn how to collaborate effectively on both of these levels, McREL (1) engages teams in activities that raise issues about how teams work together, (2) provides information to expand the team's thinking about specific issues that are causing conflict on the team or within the school, and (3) assists teams in developing or refining structures for collaborative learning.

McREL strategically draws on hands-on or kinesthetic activities to illustrate issues or problems teams might encounter as they work together to improve student achievement. The "Tent Pole" activity is an example of a kinesthetic activity that was used at several sites, including Urban Elementary B. This activity presents participants with the task of lowering a tent pole to the ground. The only rule governing the activity is that all participants must have 10 fingertips touching the pole at all times. At Urban Elementary B, this activity initiated a lively discussion about teamwork, strategies for collaboration, and roadblocks for accomplishing a mutual goal.

One of the advantages of kinesthetic activities is that team members can more easily recall important lessons gained from participating in these activities and apply them when making decisions. In fact, leadership team members often made connections between their current work and lessons learned, long after participating in such activities. For example, when the Urban Elementary B team was developing a plan of activities for the upcoming school year, a member commented that leadership had emerged during the planning process in the same way it had during the Tent Pole activity. In both cases, the situation seemed chaotic at first, but then someone assumed leadership and the group was able to complete the task.

When there is a particular conflict that teams need to address, McREL staff members often take a more direct approach to helping teams increase their ability to work collaboratively. For example, differing views about the role of paraprofessionals were causing conflict at Rural K–8 School. To help the leadership team find effective ways for paraprofessionals and teachers to work together, McREL consultants first engaged the team in an activity to examine existing practices related to this issue and then provided the team with a resource packet that included examples of how other schools had addressed the same issue. The information in the packet gave the team a common language to use in subsequent conversations about how they would work together in the classroom to support student learning. This approach models for teams how accessing information and resources from "best practice" can help them solve problems.

Once teams have made progress in building trust, they must consider how they will sustain it at high levels. One way to sustain trust is to develop structures that provide opportunities for teachers to learn together about the issue that matters most — instructional practice. Here we mean instructional practice in a broad sense that encompasses teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge as well as the ability to manage a classroom and design high-quality lessons. Instructional practice also includes how teachers relate to students and how they view the student's role in the classroom. McREL has several strategies for helping leadership teams establish and maintain collaborative learning structures, such as study groups and job-embedded professional development time. One example is provided by events at Rural Elementary A.

During the first year of work with Rural Elementary A, McREL staff members helped the leadership team examine its school improvement plan and determine how to allocate resources to support implementation of the plan. The team decided that teachers needed to meet on a regular basis during the school day to focus on how to meet students' learning needs. McREL consultants suggested a structure for these "collaborative learning meetings" that included time for learning new information or skills, time to discuss the progress of specific students, and time

to examine sets of student work to answer broader questions about how students across a grade level or the whole school were progressing toward meeting learning goals.

With McREL's urging and assistance, leadership team members assumed various roles (e.g., meeting coordinator, facilitator, recorder) during these meetings. Initially, teachers were uncomfortable spending this time away from their students and were unclear about how this time would help improve student achievement. To make the meetings meaningful and acceptable to the staff, the leadership team varied the activities during these meetings, trying to find the right mix. McREL staff provided moral support to team members and pressure to "stay the course" when the team met with resistance from other school staff members.

As the meetings continued into a second year, teachers began to share changes in their practice that were having positive effects on student achievement. They started to ask one another, "If your students are doing better, what are you doing differently?" Unlike the first year, teachers were willing to use structured processes for examining their students' work with colleagues and to consider using a common approach to teaching writing. In addition, during the second year teachers who were not on the leadership team assumed leadership for planning and facilitating the meetings, rather than relying on leadership team members. By the end of the second year of these meetings, teachers recognized the usefulness of the meetings, were more engaged in the meetings, and assumed more responsibility for them. They even considered ways to increase the amount of time they had for these meetings. In short, when all teachers began sharing information about their successes and struggles with instruction and as student achievement increased, the level of trust in the school increased. These meetings are now seen as a way to sustain that trust.

Celebrate Accomplishments

One way to build trust is to affirm legitimate accomplishments. A large part of McREL's work with leadership team members is helping them see the need to celebrate their accomplishments. Team members initially share celebratory events that are more personal in nature. With direction from McREL, the accomplishments that are celebrated shift to ones related to the school's progress toward increasing student achievement. Toward this end, McREL gives leadership team members information explaining the importance of celebrations and provides team members with strategies to document the school's accomplishments.

McREL's decision to make celebrations an integral part of leadership team meetings reflects findings from McREL's meta-analysis of leadership (as reported in Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004), which found that fair and systematic recognition of teachers and students was significantly associated with student achievement. Others (e.g., Peterson & Deal, 2002; McKeever and the California School Leadership Academy, 2003) also emphasize the importance of celebrations in building a strong school culture that is focused on continuous improvement. As McKeever and CSLA explain:

> Schools typically celebrate student growth with ceremonies for students — those who have been on the honor roll, won citizenship awards, won attendance awards, and so on. But the staff who deserve credit for data-verified improvement of

> student achievement seem to feel that public recognition of their work is not appropriate. Teams may be hesitant to organize such events. (p. 21)

Setting aside time during each meeting for team members to recognize legitimate accomplishments provides an opportunity for them to practice behaviors they can encourage others to engage in as well.

McREL encouraged the middle schools in State B to create a visual display for their school accomplishments. Each meeting with the leadership team began with participants sharing accomplishments they had to celebrate. Team members wrote these achievements on chart paper then posted the charts in the teachers' lounge. Doing so shifted the celebration to a public space where fellow staff members could add comments or make notes about other accomplishments to acknowledge.

ACTIVATE THE PLAN

To successfully put the improvement plan into action, teams must understand the change process and how to manage the resulting transitions. Teams also must ensure that teachers know how to implement the strategies in the plan, which generally requires that teachers learn new instructional strategies or improve their use of strategies already in their repertoire. This section describes how these aspects of implementing improvement efforts were addressed in the sites.

Learn How to Manage Change

To successfully implement a viable school improvement plan, leadership team members must understand the change process and learn to effectively manage change. To help them with these tasks, McREL (1) provides team members with information about the change process and the difference between change and transition, (2) models the use of tools that teams can use to identify and problem solve barriers to their improvement process, and (3) shares strategies that team members can use to identify solutions to problems that may arise when changes are introduced to the rest of the staff.

Many times, teams do not understand the change process and how it affects the success of their efforts. The concept of change is a complex one, and McREL has tried to help teams deal with that complexity by deepening their understanding of the change process over time. For example, in State A, McREL addressed the change process at several of the meetings convening the leadership teams of the four schools. At one of the early sessions, teams were introduced to the Concerns Based Adoption Model (Hall & Hord, 2001). At another session, teams participated in the Systems Thinking/Systems Changing simulation (Mundry & Bershad, 1997), which helped teams understand the basic tenets of systems thinking and the importance of communication in the change process. In a recent session, teams learned about first- and second-order change and the implications of second-order change for their school improvement efforts. McREL plans to revisit the topic of change in an upcoming meeting by providing teams with information about how to manage second-order change.

In addition to understanding the process of change, leadership teams must learn how to manage the transitions that come with change. Bridges (2003) describes change as being tied to a

particular situation or focused on a specific outcome. When related to school improvement, this outcome typically is increasing student achievement. Transition, Bridges explains, is different: "It is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about" (p. 3). These three phases include the *ending*, the *neutral zone*, and the *new beginning*. The ending refers to the phase during which team members acknowledge that favored practices will end and they grieve for that loss. The next phase, the neutral zone, represents a time when old ways of practice have ended and new ways of practice are beginning. During this phase, neither the old way of practice nor the new way of practice works well. As a result, leadership team members and their colleagues feel confused and upset. Beginning is the final phase. This is the time for making a commitment to a new way of practice and taking a chance that the new way of practice will work. During this phase, staff members develop new understandings, new values, new attitudes, and new identities.

To build the capacity of leadership team members to manage transition, McREL provides information that helps teams differentiate between change and transition and understand why they and their colleagues react to proposed changes in predictable ways. For example, at the beginning of the 2003–2004 school year, McREL facilitated a discussion about the three phases of transition with Urban Middle A's leadership team because the school was undergoing a number of changes, in particular implementing a block scheduling system and changing their team structure. Team members reviewed characteristics of each phase and brainstormed action steps they could take to help individuals on their staff more successfully transition through each of the phases. Reflecting on this meeting, many Urban Middle A leadership team members expressed their appreciation for the clarity provided through this activity. Several members commented that leading change in their school would require them and their colleagues to "say goodbye to the old ways of doing things." Discussing these transition phases and identifying action steps gave the leadership team a common language to express their frustration and a plan to ease the transition as they moved their work forward.

McREL also models the use of tools that leadership teams can use to identify the magnitude of a change. When team members recognize that a proposed initiative is a first- or second-order change, they are better positioned to structure appropriate action steps. For example, Urban Elementary B used the Leadership Team Planning Template to problem solve the implementation of a consistent process to review student work. This template is designed to identify a proposed change, determine its magnitude of change, recognize the leadership teams' role in addressing the change, and visualize how the team and the school might operate differently if the change was implemented. By using this template, Urban Elementary B's leadership team realized that collaboratively looking at student work was a first-order change for some team members and a second-order change for others. Discussing team members' beliefs and assumptions about the change — or reflecting on their mental models — made it possible for Urban Elementary B's leadership team to consider how they would prepare for upcoming change with the rest of the staff.

Increase Knowledge of Effective Instructional Practices

With McREL's assistance, leadership team members increase their understanding of effective instructional practices that improve student achievement. Throughout the site work, McREL deepened leadership team members' knowledge by (1) suggesting structures to highlight

effective instructional practices and (2) sharing information and strategies known to enhance instruction and improve student achievement.

One structure that McREL models with leadership teams is the Student Intervention Matrix. This matrix provides a way for leadership teams to highlight specific students in the school who are performing below the proficient level and the instructional strategies that teachers have used with these students. Urban Elementary C's leadership team used this matrix to find ways to better address the learning needs of students who were not reading at the proficient level. This activity provided a structured way for team members to discuss the reading instructional strategies that had been used and alternative strategies teachers could consider. In addition, team members contemplated why some strategies were not attempted. For example, some teachers were not using small-group reading instruction because they were concerned about classroom management. By having this conversation, the leadership team considered ways to reallocate the school's human resources and provided assistance during small-group instructional time.

To help leadership team members learn about strategies to improve student achievement, McREL focused on a meta-analysis of effective instructional practices (Marzano, 1998). In State A, for example, McREL purchased copies of *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) for each participant. This book identifies nine categories of instructional strategies that are correlated with improved student learning. At the first convening of the leadership teams from the four State A schools, participants were asked to read several chapters from the book. McREL staff members expanded on the information in the book by presenting specific techniques that teachers could implement in their classrooms. To encourage leadership team members to continue learning about the strategies highlighted in the book, McREL demonstrated how to conduct a study group. At a subsequent meeting in February 2003 of the four leadership teams, McREL revisited the strategies previously addressed and reviewed additional strategies. McREL staff members also revisited the strategies to varying degrees during visits to the individual sites.

In State B, McREL also addressed instructional strategies. Rather than distributing copies of *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Marzano et al., 2001), however, McREL distributed study group packets that are based on information in that book. The study group packets present the information in a user-friendly way and include examples that illustrate how teachers have implemented the practices in their classrooms. McREL has used the materials at various schools to engage staff in discussions about generalizations from research about the instructional strategies and recommended classroom practices. For example, at Urban Middle School B, team members discussed the materials and participated in an activity related to the use of praise and recognition in the classroom. Leadership team members then used these materials with other staff to determine the extent to which Urban Middle School B teachers used the recommended classroom practices. The team discovered that groups of teachers within the school differ on their views of which forms of praise are appropriate. One group in particular disagreed with the recommendations and said they weren't going to follow them. This posed an interesting dilemma for the group — one with which they are still struggling.

LESSONS LEARNED: IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

As explained in Chapter 1, McREL's work in sites focuses on research-based practices that have a positive effect on student achievement. McREL staff members addressed practices in the long-term work with these 12 sites. Practices addressed in this section include collegiality and professionalism, which relate to the professional interactions in a school and teachers' individual and collective belief in their ability to effect change.

Lesson 1: Use structures to guide conversations. One characteristic of a professional learning community is shared practice. This means that teachers have conversations with one another about how and what they teach and their beliefs about students. McREL staff members met with considerable resistance as they worked with teams to establish a culture in which teachers could discuss their students' work. In some cases, this reaction reflected teachers' beliefs that there wasn't much to be gained by looking at student work. As they put it, they all had a great deal of experience grading student papers. McREL staff members had to learn how to help teachers understand the difference between grading papers and deeply examining student work to determine how students thought about, responded to, and performed on assignments and assessments.

McREL also learned that part of teachers' reluctance to engage in professional conversations stemmed from their relationships with their colleagues. In many cases, teachers in these schools had known one another for many years and were friendly if not friends. Because they lived in a small town where many people are related and everyone knows everyone else, they did not want to give feedback that could be considered negative. In other schools, the opposite problem existed. Teachers didn't know one another well and didn't feel comfortable giving or receiving feedback from people they didn't know.

For both situations, McREL staff learned that using protocols, or guidelines for conversations, helped overcome some of this reluctance, though it took time. In fact, in some situations it was necessary to use a particular protocol several times or try different protocols before teachers' reluctance diminished. McREL staff also learned that the best way to introduce teams to protocols, and to gain their acceptance in the long run, was to use protocols to discuss articles, book chapters, or big issues (e.g., professional development). Once teams were comfortable using protocols and having structured conversations about professional issues, then they were more willing to use protocols to discuss student work.

Lesson 2: Focus on establishing collaborative learning time. Although time almost always arises as a vexing problem in school reform, setting aside time for collaborative work during the school day is possibly the most important change a school can make. In a set of interviews with various members of Rural Elementary A's leadership team in March 2004, individuals reiterated the importance of having the time to work together. Perhaps this fourth-grade teacher put it best:

> Before we were on school improvement, I thought of improving as a personal goal. How much more can I do to have my students learn in the classroom? Now [improvement is] really more zeroed in to the exact reading skills or math skills that are the important ones. With school improvement, I've realized that it's not

> just my personal goals, but our goals as a whole school to see that we are following the school improvement plan and using good teaching strategies so that all students can learn the best that they possibly can.

This teacher expressed the opinion, as did others, that teachers' weekly collaborative learning meetings led to collective, rather than individual, efforts to improve student achievement.

McREL recognizes the power in teachers working collaboratively. What has become clearer as a result of McREL's long-term work is that conversations about the importance of collaborative learning time should start as early in the relationship with leadership teams as possible. Clearly, setting aside the time for collaborative learning is only half the task. The culture of the school also must embrace collaborative learning if it is to yield benefits. McREL staff members learned that most teams need help understanding how to establish the structures for collaborative learning and how to effectively use the time once they have it. Staff also learned that once structures for collaborative learning are established, McREL staff need to encourage, and at times prod, teams to persevere when initial attempts at collaborative work meet with resistance. As time progresses, McREL staff need to gradually hand the reins of school improvement over to the leadership team. As one leadership team member put it, school improvement has to become "their thing."

Lesson 3: Be aware of the far-reaching influence of actions. According to living systems theory, systems seek to make connections within themselves and between themselves and other systems. That's why relationships are so important in systems theory and why culture — whose lifeblood is relationships — will always impact a school's ability to implement change. It's not surprising, then, that change agents need to attend to culture when working with schools. McREL staff knew this as they began our work with sites. What staff didn't realize was the extent to which their presence would affect events and relationships in the site, sometimes without intending to do so.

For example, in one of the rural schools, our work on professional learning community has challenged existing norms related to gender roles. Through this work, female members of the team have accepted leadership roles, where previously only males were seen as leaders. Several team members have shared how their leadership team experiences have transformed them on a personal as well as professional level. Although admission of this transformation can certainly signal progress, it can produce unintended consequences. Simply put, it is important to know that working with leadership teams and encouraging cultural shifts that run counter to the norms of a community can stir more than one pot.

CHAPTER 4
ASSESSING PROGRESS

Stage 6 of the McREL Approach, Monitor and Evaluate, comprises the third phase of the McREL Approach, Assessing Progress. In this phase, McREL consultants and school leadership teams work together to develop structures to monitor progress toward improvement. In addition, the intervention work in this phase includes an evaluation component. Using the benchmarks identified in the tailored improvement plan as checkpoints, McREL staff members assist school leadership teams, and when appropriate provide professional training, so that they can systematically analyze their data (e.g., outcome, perception, program, demographic). The results of the data analysis inform the continuous decisions that leadership teams make. Improvement strategies that are effective are continued; those strategies that are not producing the desired outcomes are eliminated and new options are added.

The Assessing Progress and Taking Action phases of the McREL Approach are addressed separately, but are interdependent. Without the goals and strategies identified through the second phase, which includes creating a tailored school improvement plan and implementing the plan, the key actions of the third phase — monitoring and evaluating the action steps outlined in the school improvement plan — are irrelevant. As noted earlier, McREL's theory of action assumes that increasing student achievement requires that more than one person (e.g., the principal) must assume responsibility to lead school improvement efforts. Thus, McREL's intervention focuses on increasing the capacity of members of the school leadership team to monitor and evaluate the school's improvement efforts.

Feedback is instructive for external change agents as well. As school leadership teams develop the capacity to monitor and evaluate their progress toward increased student achievement, McREL consultants also reflect on their work with the sites, documenting progress and lessons learned. These data influence future work with schools. McREL consultants use structures and processes to evaluate the intensive site work and refine the activities used in the sites as needed.

STAGE 6: MONITOR AND EVALUATE

This section details how McREL worked with school leadership teams to build their capacity to reflect on their progress and make appropriate adjustments to their operating structures to stay the course toward increasing student achievement. The section begins with a description of the actions McREL took to help the leadership teams in the 12 sites monitor and evaluate progress toward goals and concludes with an explanation of the strategies that McREL staff members used to document and learn from the intensive site work.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

When a school leadership team implements an improvement plan, the team also establishes a system to monitor the policies and programs included in the plan. Creating a monitoring system and using the system to determine the effectiveness of the actions and strategies in the plan creates the conditions needed for leadership teams to rely on continuous

feedback as they proceed with their improvement efforts. When leadership teams make the effort to reflect on what is working and what needs to be changed, they have a greater chance of sustaining their improvement efforts. To help teams monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their improvement efforts, McREL (1) introduces structures teams can use to monitor progress and (2) models the use of data.

Establishing design teams is one way that leadership teams can monitor school improvement progress. As described by Baird-Wilkerson (2003), design teams are subgroups that complete specific assignments recommended by the large group; design teams provide "a way for a larger group to go more deeply into advancing a piece of work without involving everyone in each step throughout the process" (p. 17). These design teams identify their immediate goals, determine indicators of success, and measure their own progress.

To illustrate, McREL suggested the use of design teams at Urban Elementary E following the leadership team's analysis of survey data about communication in the school. McREL modeled the use of design teams by first identifying the major issues that arose from the survey data and creating a team for each issue. Each team then identified follow-up steps they could complete before the next site visit and developed an action plan for how the steps would be carried out. At subsequent meetings with McREL, each design team provided an update on their progress, obtained feedback from the leadership team about logical next steps, and created another action plan. By establishing a regular reporting process for each design team, the leadership team was able to monitor its progress toward improved communication with the rest of the staff.

Another way McREL helps teams use data to monitor and evaluate their progress is by modeling how different types of data can serve these purposes. For example, McREL guided Urban Middle A's leadership team through a process to analyze their state assessment data and the results of a school climate survey given to students and parents. As groups reviewed these data, they used a set of questions to guide their thinking about how instructional practices might be affecting student performance.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE THE INTENSIVE SITE WORK

When McREL consultants complete site visits, the documentation process and evaluation of meetings with the leadership team begins. Between site visits, McREL staff email or call the principal and other designated members of the leadership team to plan the next meeting. McREL staff also document the site visits in written reports and participate in debriefing meetings, which are audiotaped to provide additional documentation of site visit activities. The written documentation includes two reports: the external site report and the internal site report.

The external site report is a summary of what happened during the meeting with the leadership team (e.g., activities, results of discussions) and any meetings or professional development sessions with other staff members. The external report also includes written acknowledgment of the responsibilities of leadership team members and McREL staff between visits. These reports are forwarded to leadership team members following each visit and serve as a record of the time spent with the team. State- and district-level contacts receive copies of these external reports as well.

Another record of McREL's work with its field sites is the internal site report. This document provides a way for McREL consultants to capture their reflections on how they planned for each site visit and how teams are progressing in the work. Specifically, McREL consultants are interested in reflecting on how the intensive site work affects the leadership teams' identity (e.g., their sense of purpose, their understanding and commitment to their mission and vision), the flow of information as evidenced by communication among team members and between the team and other members of the staff, and the nature and quality of relationships among leadership team members and between the leadership team and their colleagues over the course of the intervention.

The monthly debriefing meetings for the McREL staff who conduct the site visits are designed to help McREL staff develop a common understanding of how to conduct, interpret, and learn from the work. At each meeting, McREL staff members focus on the successes and struggles associated with the site work and hold in-depth discussions about an aspect of systemic school improvement in order to deepen their understanding of that aspect. Some topics that have received special focus at these meetings include how to address the concept of school culture and strategies to use when preparing to exit a site. These meetings provide opportunities for McREL staff members to collaborate as problem-solving partners. For example, the group might discuss how specific tools were used and possible adjustments to those tools to increase their effectiveness. Through participation in these meetings, McREL staff members build on one another's knowledge, strengthening their own skills and that of the team as a whole. These monthly meetings are audio-taped and selectively transcribed.

LESSONS LEARNED: MONITOR AND EVALUATE

Monitoring and evaluating progress is an important phase of the McREL Approach. During this phase, school leadership teams and McREL consultants determine how effective the strategies they use for improvement are and make adjustments to the plans for improvement, as needed. The lessons learned about monitoring and evaluating progress reflect importance of feedback and the need to establish checks and balances to ensure that the work proceeds.

Lesson 1: Help teams hold themselves accountable. McREL staff members have knowledge and skills related to a variety of topics, which they apply to develop tools and processes that help teams complete tasks associated with school improvement and the establishment of a professional learning community. But in most cases, McREL staff members have no authority to hold team members accountable for completing those tasks. McREL staff members learned to provide more guidance on how the teams can hold themselves accountable for following through on their agreements to complete tasks that advance their work and the school's improvement efforts.

One strategy McREL consultants initially used to provide such guidance was creating a "to do" list at each meeting that included assignments that should be completed by team members before the next meeting. In the early stages of work with teams, McREL staff members found that the creation of the list was not enough. Team members still did not complete their tasks for a variety of reasons. For instance, in some cases team members discovered after McREL consultants left that they did not have the skills necessary to complete the task. In other cases, team members were too busy and lacked the time to accomplish tasks between visits.

Sometimes tasks weren't completed simply because team members were unaccustomed to being held accountable for group projects. One way McREL staff members addressed this was to talk with one or two members of the team to determine why assignments weren't completed and follow up by reviewing information previously introduced or by setting up structures to facilitate completion of future tasks. McREL consultants also addressed the issue directly with the team, helping them establish agreements about follow through and providing time during meetings for team members to practice how items from the list would be accomplished.

Lesson 2: External change agents can use specific tools and processes to learn from the school intervention work. As described in this section, McREL staff completed internal and external reports after each site visit and participated in monthly debriefing meetings. McREL staff members engaged in reflective dialogue, deprivatized their practice, and developed a shared vision of the work and a shared commitment to it. In short, the group of staff working in the intensive sites became a professional learning community. In the early stages of the work, these staff members shared successes and struggles at each site and recounted the details of each site visit.

Over a period of time, it became clear that McREL staff members could learn more if they focused on a specific aspect of the work and structured a conversation about it. For example, many times McREL staff members would read an article or two related to the topic and then use a protocol to discuss the reading. They would deepen the discussion by sharing examples of tools or activities that had been used to address the topic with sites. Although these meetings have been helpful, McREL staff have learned that to maximize their learning they need to spend more time discussing their experiences in the sites, framing the discussion even more closely in relation to the stages of the McREL Approach and the practices that affect student achievement.

CHAPTER 5
TRANSFERRING LEADERSHIP

The final stage of the McREL Approach is Stage 7, Hand Off and Exit. As noted throughout this document, McREL's intervention in low-performing schools is designed to assist leadership teams in making the systemic changes that will improve student achievement. As a result of this intervention, leadership team members increase their capacity to sustain their improvement efforts. The ultimate goal of the intervention is transferring all responsibilities for continuous improvement to leadership in the school. Thus, Stage 7 of the McREL Approach is defined by the actions that help McREL staff "hand off" improvement efforts and "exit" with the expectation that the leadership team will be able to continue its work alone.

Although transferring leadership responsibilities represents the final phase of the McREL Approach, McREL consultants work toward this end throughout the preceding phases of the approach. As McREL presents actions and elements related to sustainability, leadership team members have multiple opportunities to assess the extent to which they understand the elements. In addition, leadership team members develop plans to ensure that they have access to resources and structures that will ensure sustainability of their improvement efforts.

STAGE 7: HAND OFF AND EXIT

One of the goals of the work with leadership teams is to help them develop skills that will enable them to solve improvement-related problems on their own. Like parents whose children have grown up and left home, McREL staff members become sources of indirect rather than direct support for teams. McREL staff members attend to sustainability throughout the duration of the relationship by continually asking such questions as, Where is the team in the learning process? Does the team know how to determine if its work is making a difference?

McREL staff members are in the early stages of developing ways to find answers to these questions and will use site visits scheduled for the 2004-2005 school year to test the solutions. However, one way McREL consultants have tried to address the issue of sustainability is to ask teams to complete a performance assessment. Specifically, Rural Elementary A's leadership team was given the task of organizing all of the information that McREL had given them over the last two years in a way that could be easily accessed when they were faced with a school improvement-related problem. McREL staff members did not provide any assistance with the task, which initially was disconcerting for team members. Team members persevered with the task until they reached a solution that made sense to them. This approach will be used with other teams after some modifications are made.

McREL also addressed issues related to sustainability during the winter 2004 meeting with the State A sites. Leadership team members from the four sites reviewed rubrics from McREL's (2003) *Leadership Folio Series: Sustaining School Improvement* to assess the extent to which each team understood and enacted the strategies listed for each component (i.e., professional learning community, data-driven decisions, professional development, resource allocation, communication) associated with sustainability. When team members completed their self-evaluation, each team selected a problem they anticipated encountering in the near future

(e.g., How will we meet the academic needs of the high percentage of second-language learners who will be future students in our school?). With McREL's assistance, teams engaged in a step-by-step problem-solving process designed to highlight the team's progress toward becoming effective at implementing change in their schools while identifying areas of improvement. For example, one leadership team recognized the need to devote more resources to the less technical aspects of school improvement such as building their capacity to recognize teachers as leaders and as valuable sources of information about instruction.

LESSONS LEARNED: HAND-OFF AND EXIT

The primary goal of McREL's intervention with leadership teams in low-performing schools is to build their capacity to sustain improvement efforts independently. As noted earlier, McREL consultants will continue to evaluate strategies and processes related to this phase of the approach and anticipate additional lessons in this regard as the 2004–2005 school year ends.

Lesson 1: Use a variety of tools early and often to help leadership team members consider their own sustainability. During the early stages of the intervention process, leadership team members rely on external change agents to help them problem solve. To build long-term sustainability as the work progresses, team members must acquire the skills and strategies to independently address the issues that arise. By modeling the use of tools such as rubrics and a problem-solving process, and reviewing the tools often, leadership team members begin to refer to these past experiences and can use the related tools and activities as needed.

Lesson 2: Develop and use a list of indicators of team capacity to sustain improvement efforts. Another way that McREL consultants are improving their understanding of the exit phase of their work with teams is by developing a list of indicators that teams have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes as well as the structures and processes needed to sustain improvement in the school. For example, indicators that the team is functioning at high levels and understands their ongoing role in school improvement include having procedures for inducting new members, forming ad hoc teams for completing specific tasks, and adhering to norms and using them as a guide for increasing the productivity of meetings and collaborative work.

CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The chapters in this report provide details about tools and strategies that McREL staff used to help leadership teams in Central Region schools build their capacity to improve student achievement. Also included are lessons learned about McREL's role as an external change agent assisting low-performing schools. The tools, strategies, and lessons reflect McREL's work as it relates to the seven stages of the McREL Approach: (1) assess readiness for improvement, (2) provide an overview of the process, (3) assess strengths and needs, (4) create a tailored plan for improvement, (5) implement the plan, (6) monitor and evaluate, and (7) hand off and exit. In this document, these seven stages have been collapsed into four phases: (1) building relationships, (2) taking action, (3) assessing progress, and (4) transferring leadership.

As described in Chapter 2 of this report, McREL's school intervention process reflects the understanding that the influence of many supersedes the influence of one. As a result, the creation of a professional learning community is a primary goal when applying the McREL Approach in schools. This emphasis reflects not only the idea that leadership for school improvement is a shared responsibility but also that teachers' knowledge of content and pedagogy and the quality of professional relationships in the school have an impact on student achievement. A professional learning community is successful when the relationships within the school community and between the school and the external change agent are professional, collegial, and purposeful. Toward this end, building relationships represents the first phase of the McREL Approach. The activities and strategies described in Chapter 2 help leadership teams begin to understand how to develop the collegiality and professionalism that are essential to the work they are undertaking together. In short, these activities are designed to increase the leadership teams' capacity to create professional learning communities.

The second phase of the McREL Approach is characterized as taking action. The bulk of work conducted in the intensive sites over the past two years falls in this phase of the approach. School leadership teams and McREL consultants collaborate to determine a site's strengths and needs, to create a tailored plan of improvement, and then implement the plan. Throughout this phase, McREL shares research findings that describe effective schools including school practices, teacher practices, leadership, and organizational development. McREL's intervention with leadership teams is designed to prepare team members to lead the improvement process in their schools. As described in Chapter 3, McREL staff members model strategies and suggest structures to help leadership teams improve the degree of communication in their buildings, increase the level of trust among colleagues, and actualize plans for improvement. Examples from the field site work described in this chapter reflect the school practices and teacher practices introduced in Chapter 1. When managed in a systematic manner, these school and teacher practices promote student achievement.

Assessing Progress is the third phase of the McREL Approach, and strategies used in this phase are described in Chapter 4. For any school improvement plan to succeed, leadership must evaluate progress and make changes, as needed. Often schools are not in the habit of continuously evaluating their progress. With McREL's assistance, leadership teams identify benchmarks, establish methods to assess progress in relationship to the benchmarks, and make

appropriate adjustments to the plan that will support the desired outcomes. Establishing challenging goals and providing effective feedback are school-level practices that positively affect student achievement (Marzano, 2000). Setting goals, such as those established during the taking action phase, and then monitoring progress toward those goals as described in Chapter 4 is essential to becoming a self-sustaining organization.

Although McREL consultants work with leadership teams over the course of several years, it is clear from the beginning that the partnership will end after a relatively short time. Knowing that this exit is coming, McREL staff members help teams establish processes and structures that school staff can rely on to support their school improvement work when the partnership ends. Attention to this aspect of the approach, as described in Chapter 5, is most prominent as McREL prepares to exit a site.

Lessons about McREL's role as change agent and the practices that affect student achievement are included throughout the document. These lessons highlight the importance of attending to the school's culture, providing teams with explicit and concrete tasks, and helping them establish structures and processes that will sustain their improvement efforts long after their relationship with McREL ends. In addition, these lessons emphasize the human aspects of the work — the importance of leadership team members being attuned to how their relationships with one another are developing and the importance of McREL staff monitoring how their actions affect team members. The lessons also address the importance of structured time for learning, both for the leadership teams and McREL staff. Articulating these lessons helped McREL staff view their work from new perspectives.

These lessons, and, indeed, this report as a whole, should not be considered a final description of McREL's implementation of the McREL Approach: There is more to be learned about working in several of the stages, particularly those related to monitoring and evaluating and transferring leadership for improvement efforts to the site. Also, work to date has not addressed all of the school, teacher, and leadership practices and student characteristics that are associated with improved student achievement. Tools and strategies related to several of these aspects of the Approach will be pilot-tested during the 2004-2005 school year. McREL also will field-test existing tools and strategies during 2005 in additional sites, both inner-city and high-poverty locations. This focus reflects McREL's interest in assisting schools most in need of improvement.

At this point, this report is intended as a guiding document as McREL continues to refine its research- and theory-based approach to school improvement. A more user-friendly field guide for others engaged in similar work will be forthcoming after further development of the content and processes of the McREL Approach.

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