THE McREL APPROACH TO IMPROVING SCHOOLING AND ITS OUTCOMES:

FINAL REPORT

prepared by
Ceri B. Dean, Ph.D.

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McREL

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PREFACE

> *In 2002, we did not make adequate progress, primarily in two sub-groups of students. It was like a death in the family. We were working hard but felt like we were being kicked in the rear and everyone was trying to "fix" us. We played the "blame game." We'd looked at data and had implemented research-based strategies, but we weren't making progress. McREL helped us do a reality check as a staff and brought us the bridge to higher ground as the floodwaters were encroaching upon us.*
>
> *Principal, low-performing school*

Crossing the bridge to higher achievement poses significant challenges for low-performing schools. To get there, they often must overcome entrenched patterns of failure that demoralize teachers, students, and parents and lead to lower expectations for students and staff alike. With these lowered expectations as the backdrop, the school finds itself less and less able to take actions that make a difference. Without assistance — from the state, district, or an outside agency — chances that the school will improve are slim.

Providing the kind of assistance that helps low-performing schools meet the challenge of improving student achievement has been the focus of McREL's work since the early 1990s. This focus has led to a variety of research and technical assistance projects, culminating in a five-year effort that involved McREL staff working closely with a number of schools in a variety of urban and rural settings. Through this work, McREL pilot-tested tools and strategies it designed to help these schools engage in and lead the school improvement process. This work was guided by research and best practice in school improvement, educational change, leadership, and professional development.

The result of these efforts is a framework — the McREL Approach — for guiding schools' efforts to improve student achievement and build capacity for long-term improvement. The framework outlines a systemic approach that is based on a coherent, articulated theory of change that helps schools understand and manage the complexity of change. The McREL Approach framework is built upon a set of research-based school, teacher, and leadership practices and student characteristics that are correlated with improved student achievement (see Marzano, 2000).

The purpose of this report is to document the development of the McREL Approach for those interested in school improvement. This document builds upon an earlier intensive site report (McIver & Dean, 2004) and the preliminary McREL Approach report (Dean, 2004). The first section describes the McREL Approach framework, which includes six stages for assisting sites in acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to lead school improvement and sustain their improvement efforts for the long term. We then detail how McREL staff tested their initial theories about assisting low-performing schools and includes lessons learned from the application of these ideas in sites in South Dakota and Kansas. We then describe the next steps in applying the McREL Approach. The appendix provides background information on the research that underlies this school improvement process.

THE McREL APPROACH FRAMEWORK

Helping all students reach proficiency in mathematics and reading by 2014 is a daunting task, particularly for chronically low-performing schools. The McREL Approach is a framework for providing assistance to such schools to help them not only meet the short-term challenges of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), but also to develop the capacity to respond to future challenges. This is accomplished by assisting school staffs in learning what to do to improve student achievement, why to do it, how to do it, and when to do it.

The McREL Approach is not a quick-fix solution for raising test scores, nor is it a defined "program" for improvement. It is a comprehensive, facilitated school improvement process focused on the actions that make a difference in student achievement. Under the Approach, change agents assist schools to share leadership, develop a purposeful community, and apply specific strategies for managing the differential impacts of change on members of the school community. The Approach reflects McREL's accumulated knowledge and expertise related to the factors (leadership practices, school practices, teacher practices, and student characteristics) that affect student achievement and the ways in which change agents can assist schools in addressing these factors.

This section provides a brief description of the theory of change and theory of action embedded in the Approach, and describes the six stages of the Approach. Details about the early development of the Approach and the research that underlies it are included in the Appendix.

McREL's THEORY OF CHANGE

McREL's theory of change, which is built on the work of a number of change theorists (i.e., Bridges, 1991, 2003; Cuban, 1992, 1996, 1997; Fullan, 2001, 2002; Heifetz, 1994, 1997; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Lewin, 1951; Rogers, 1995, 2003), reflects a systemic perspective and centers on the idea that change is of different types — first order and second order. First-order, or incremental/continuous changes, do not "rock the boat" or result in great differences in the way business is conducted. Changes with first- order implications are perceived as (1) an extension of the past, (2) consistent with prevailing organizational norms, (3) congruent with personal values, and (4) implemented with existing knowledge and skills. Second-order changes, or fundamental/discontinuous changes, transform the organization — they lead to a new way of "doing business" that is significantly different from the old way. Changes with second-order implications are perceived as (1) a break with past practice, (2) inconsistent with prevailing organizational norms, (3) incongruent with personal values, and (4) requiring new knowledge and skills. In other words, if first order change represents "tinkering" with the system, second-order change represents "radical redesign."

We believe that many change efforts fail because those leading the effort do not assess the magnitude of change for those involved and do not differentiate their approach accordingly. When a change has second-, not first-, order implications, leaders must fulfill their leadership responsibilities in different ways. Specifically, during second-order change, leaders must manage personal and group transitions and share leadership for responsibilities related to: establishing strong lines of communication with teachers and among students; fostering shared beliefs and a

sense of community and cooperation; involving teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions; and establishing a set of standard operating procedures and routines.

Under the McREL Approach, work with school leadership teams helps them understand both types of change and identify specific actions they can take related to each of the leadership responsibilities that are important during second-order change.

THEORY OF ACTION

The theory of action embedded in the McREL Approach framework reflects a commitment to building the capacity for continuous improvement among school staff. In other words, as a result of engaging in work with McREL, the school will have structures, processes, and attitudes in place that help it solve problems and continuously improve on its own in the future.

The theory of action recognizes that the principal plays an important role in school improvement but, given the nature of the changes involved, suggests 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.
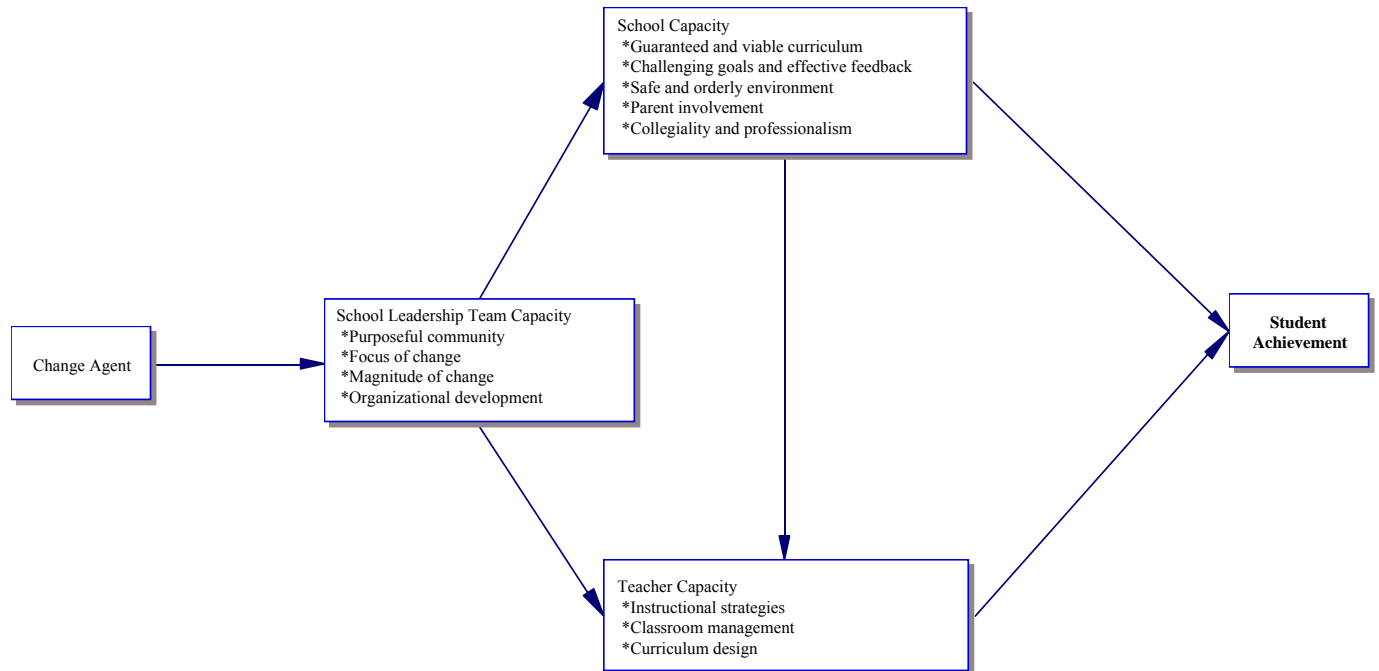
Accordingly, the theory of action highlights the role of a representative school leadership team in establishing a purposeful community and in leading school improvement efforts. Purposeful community captures the idea that the staff in a school works together toward *shared* goals, targeting their resources — both tangible and intangible — to accomplish those goals. These goals can only be accomplished because the staff is acting as a whole. Purposeful community also incorporates the concept of collective efficacy. For schools, collective efficacy refers to the perceptions of teachers that together they can make a positive difference with their students, regardless of mitigating factors (Goddard, 2001).

There is evidence that collective efficacy has a stronger effect on student achievement than socioeconomic status (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002). This is good news for low-performing schools that have many students who live near and below the poverty line. Often, teachers in such schools believe that there is nothing they can do to overcome the effects of poverty and consequently they feel powerless to help their students. This can lead to lowered expectations for student achievement and fewer opportunities for students to learn the knowledge they need to meet challenging standards. McREL staff help school leadership teams understand what collective efficacy is and how to increase collective efficacy in their schools.

McREL's theory of action maintains that the focus of school improvement efforts should be on the school-level and teacher-level factors that influence student achievement (Marzano, 2000, 2003). These factors are included under school capacity and teacher capacity, respectively, in Exhibit 1. The theory of action is built on the premise that leadership teams 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.

Exhibit 1: Theory of Action

School Capacity
  *Guaranteed and viable curriculum
  *Challenging goals and effective feedback
  *Safe and orderly environment
  *Parent involvement
  *Collegiality and professionalism

School Leadership Team Capacity
  *Purposeful community
  *Focus of change
  *Magnitude of change
  *Organizational development

Change Agent

Student Achievement

Teacher Capacity
  *Instructional strategies
  *Classroom management
  *Curriculum design

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). These change agents must be prepared to assume a variety of roles, including catalyst, content expert/solution giver, process helper, and resource linker (Havelock & Zlotolow, 1995). In the catalyst role, the change agent prods the system to help it overcome the inertia that keeps it from making necessary changes. The solution giver, or content expert, serves as a "surveyor of the larger landscape," making others aware of new ideas and stirring their interest in change. The process helper attends to all aspects of the change process — including evaluation — and focuses on helping others become problem solvers. The resource linker helps leadership teams find and make the best use of a variety of resources.

STAGES OF THE MCREL APPROACH

Improving student achievement is a complex task that requires a long-term commitment on the part of school staff. The current version of the McREL Approach includes six stages (1) Getting Started, (2) Setting the Stage, (3) Developing the Plan, (4) Launching the Plan, (5) Tracking Progress, and (6) Maintaining Momentum.

The descriptions that follow explain the goal(s) and types of actions that the site and the change agent take during each of the stages of the McREL Approach. Although each stage involves realizing particular goals, it is not imperative that one stage be completed before

another begins. In addition, 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. The following stages are named to capture the overarching purpose of the stage.

Stage 1: Getting Started

Improving student achievement can be viewed as an exercise in problem solving. A good problem solver knows the importance of understanding the problem before jumping to solutions. Stage 1 helps the change agent and the site begin to understand the problem and determine the level of commitment to solving it. This stage involves sharing information and laying the foundation for the personal and professional relationships that are necessary to support the success of the improvement efforts to come.

During this "getting to know you" period, the change agent provides basic information about the McREL Approach, explaining that the McREL Approach provides opportunities for schools to learn what to do to improve student achievement, why to do it, how to do it, and when to do it. The site provides information that helps the change agent understand the nature and extent of current initiatives in the school, the stability of school leadership, and the resources (e.g., time to meet in grade level teams, instructional coaches) available to support the hard work of school improvement. Much of this information is gathered through formal and informal conversation, although some data are collected through surveys, observations, and document reviews.

Exhibit 2: Summary of Actions for Stage 1 of McREL Approach

McREL Actions	Site Actions

• Provide a brief overview of McREL and the McREL Approach, which includes a general description of the interventions and outcomes, the role of McREL, and the role of the site; provide clarification as necessary
 	
• Gather information about the site related to its context, readiness to engage in improvement efforts, and system alignment
   ➢ Conduct interviews and survey site leaders and other staff to gather information about the site's context, system alignment, and readiness to engage in improvement efforts
   ➢ Review key documents provided by the site
	• Provide documents and other data that describe the site context, readiness to engage in improvement, and system alignment
	
	• Participate in interviews and respond to questionnaires
	
	• Convene key leaders who will be involved in the effort

• Compile data provided by the site, use readiness rubric to determine site readiness, prepare report for site	

Stage 2: Setting the Stage

Stage 2 is focused on making decisions: What are some possible starting points for the work? What will be the focus of the work? What strengths or current initiatives can be leveraged to get the work off the ground? What roles and responsibilities will each group carry out? What commitments will the site and McREL make to get the work done? To help answer these questions, the change agent and site leaders discuss McREL's analysis of the site's readiness to engage in change and collaboratively decide the intensity and content of the work.

This stage models how the work will progress — with a focus on data-driven decision making and collaborative work. The change agent emphasizes that although there will be some immediate successes as a result of the work, this effort is not a "quick fix" focused only on improving test scores. Rather, it is a systemic — and systematic — effort to build the school's capacity to identify and meet challenges to sustaining improvement.

There is also an emphasis on open communication during this stage. The change agent and site leaders talk about the commitments of time, money, and effort that will be needed to ensure success of the project and document their agreements about these commitments by signing a memorandum of understanding. It's time for the real work to begin!

Exhibit 3: Summary of Actions for Stage 2 of McREL Approach

McREL Actions	Site Actions

• Determine possible options for the scope of work
   ➢ Identify the parts of the system that need to be addressed
   ➢ Review capacity and readiness identified in Stage 1
   ➢ Identify possible entry points based on data collected in Stage 1
   ➢ Gauge level of site resources available for the effort
 	
• Prepare findings/recommendations
 	
• Facilitate exchange of perceptions, ideas, and information regarding potential scope of work with the site; explore options for the focus of the work
•
	• Convene key leaders who will be involved in the effort
	
	• Review report of findings/ recommendations from Stage 1
	
	• Determine possible options for the scope of the work
	
	• Collaboratively determine the nature and scope of the work; discuss commitments the site needs to make to ensure short and long-term success of the work
	
	• Clarify expectations, roles, and responsibilities for the site and McREL
	
	• Sign memorandum of understanding and/or contract

➢ Provide site with feedback (written or oral) from the analysis of data gathered during Stage 1 and recommendations for the scope of work, including potential entry points
➢ Discuss the report and recommendations, and the possible service options
 	
• Collaboratively determine nature and scope of the work
  ➢ Discuss commitments the site needs to make to ensure short and long-term success of the work
  ➢ Consider readiness, available resources, and likelihood of sustainability
  ➢ Clarify expectations, roles, and responsibilities of site and McREL
 	
• Prepare and sign memorandum of understanding and/or contract	

Stage 3: Developing the Plan

Stage 3 is about ironing out the details of the work to be done and making sure there are structures to support it. First and foremost, if the site does not have a leadership team, one is formed and begins to meet on a regular basis. The change agent provides an overview of the factors that affect student achievement (e.g., guaranteed and viable curriculum) and assists the team in reviewing data to determine the school's strengths and needs in relation to these factors.

The team uses this information to prioritize their improvement efforts, choosing an initial focus for their work, establishing goals for improvement related to that focus, and identifying strategies for accomplishing those goals. They develop a timeline for activities to put the strategies into action and monitor how often and how well those strategies are being used. This means they establish checkpoints for collecting and analyzing data, define measures and expected progress at these checkpoints, and identify data sources. The plan also outlines how data will be collected, analyzed, reported, and used to make adjustments.

Exhibit 4: Summary of Actions for Stage 3 of McREL Approach

McREL Actions	Site Actions

• Provide guidance for forming the leadership team, if necessary
 	
• Provide leadership team with an overview of McREL and the McREL Approach
   ➢ Describe the interventions and long-term outcomes
   ➢ Provide an overview of the school, teacher, and student-level practices; key leadership concepts; and the improvement process
 	
• Facilitate data retreat or other process to assist site in examining data to assess strengths and needs
   ➢ Assess school and teacher practices and student characteristics
   ➢ Determine current level of purposeful community (i.e., collective efficacy, agreed-upon processes, shared purpose and goals, and use of assets)
 	
• Facilitate development of a plan for implementing change
 	
• Collaboratively identify an initial focus for the team's work – one that is manageable and allows the team to work through the steps of the improvement process and experience success
	• Create a team that will lead the improvement effort and set aside time for them to meet with McREL and on their own
	
	• Review student achievement and other data to determine school's strengths and needs
	
	• Gather data related to school and teacher practices and student characteristics and purposeful community
	
	• Create a plan for implementing change
	   ➢ Prioritize needs
	   ➢ Collaboratively identify an initial focus for the team's work
	   ➢ Establish goals for improvement related to the focus area
	   ➢ Identify strategies for accomplishing the goals
	   ➢ Identify formative and summative methods for monitoring and evaluating progress toward the goals
	   ➢ Determine which aspects of the change have first-order implications and which have second-order implications
	
	• Develop a timeline of activities, including activities to address implications of change

Stage 4: Launching the Plan

To this point, site leaders have been laying the ground work for their improvement efforts. During Stage 4, they launch the plan by making sure that everyone has a copy of the plan and is clear about his or her role in realizing the goals of the plan. The team begins to carry out the initial actions they identified. Most likely, those actions will require that staff learn new knowledge and skills and possibly new ways of working together.

As a result, this stage is focused on individual and collective learning about a host of topics related to the factors that affect student achievement — leadership, instruction, curriculum, professional development, collaborative work, etc. The team learns how to establish structures and processes that support development of a purposeful community. They also learn how to manage the implications that proposed changes have for various stakeholders, particularly teachers. In addition, they deepen their understanding of shared leadership by learning how to work with the principal to carry out leadership responsibilities that are associated with high levels of student achievement. Two-way communication between the leadership team and the larger faculty is critical during this stage.

Exhibit 5: Summary of Actions for Stage 4 of McREL Approach

McREL Actions	Site Actions

• Provide professional development related to the focus of change (e.g., process for teaching vocabulary)
 	
• Provide professional development related to managing second-order implications
  ➢ Assist team in establishing structures and processes that encourage dialogue about and understanding of proposed changes
  ➢ Assist team in identifying and implementing strategies to manage second-order implications
 	
• Provide professional development that will help the team understand and apply the concept of shared leadership
 	
• Facilitate establishment of structures and processes to support long-term improvement (e.g., time for professional development, collaborative teams, norms for working together)
 	
• Facilitate development of monitoring and evaluation system
	• Provide time for teachers to learn what they need to know to improve student achievement for the short term and the long term
	
	• Establish structures (e.g., study groups, collaborative teams) for teacher learning
	
	• Establish norms for working together as a faculty
	
	• Implement strategies for managing second-order implications
	
	• Implement strategies for strengthening purposeful community
	  ➢ Develop/refine mission and vision
	  ➢ Take actions to increase collective efficacy and effectively use all available assets
	
	• Implement strategies in the school improvement plan
	
	• Establish a system for monitoring and evaluating improvement efforts

	• Conduct activities to support the school's efforts to improve student achievement (e.g., talk positively about improvement efforts)

Stage 5: Tracking Progress

Stage 5 focuses on an area that is critical to the health of the system — feedback. During this stage, the school's staff focuses on monitoring and evaluating implementation of the plan. The team collects and analyzes formative data related to individual students' progress and the school's progress toward improvement goals. The team and others make adjustments to strategies, structures, policies, and processes as indicated and celebrate small successes along the way to the larger goal.

At the appropriate time, the team collects summative data, celebrates successes, and determines the focus of the next round of the improvement effort. Over time, the team learns that success must be judged not only in terms of short-term gains in student improvement but also the school's ability to function as a purposeful community that can engage in continuous improvement and meet whatever challenges come its way. The data team, or the whole staff, also determines whether feedback is being used effectively for system improvement and whether the monitoring and evaluation system needs to be refined.

Exhibit 6: Summary of Actions for Stage 5 of the McREL Approach

McREL Actions	Site Actions

• Assist the team with implementation of the monitoring and evaluation system
    ➢ Provide professional development related to monitoring and evaluating improvement efforts (e.g., analyzing, interpreting, and using a variety of data for program improvement)
	• Implement the monitoring and evaluation system
	    ➢ Collect formative data and adjust strategies, structures, processes, and policies as needed; share information with stakeholders
	    ➢ Collect summative data and adjust strategies, structures, processes, and policies as needed; share information with stakeholders
	    ➢ Determine focus/scope of next improvement effort (i.e., the next spiral)
	
	 • Assess effectiveness of the evaluation system (e.g., are the appropriate data being collected?) and make adjustments as needed

Stage 6: Maintaining Momentum

One of the goals of the McREL Approach is to build the school's capacity for continuous improvement. This means the school has structures and processes that will help it meet today's challenges to educating all students as well as tomorrow's. McREL staff work toward this goal throughout the various stages, but in Stage 6, 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 to sustain improvement efforts. The plan may include ways to connect with other schools to form a network of ongoing support and virtual connections to the change agent (e.g., through email, online discussions, phone calls). Including these connections in the plan ensures that the last stage of the transfer of leadership for change from the change agent to the school staff occurs gradually rather than abruptly.

Exhibit 7: Summary of Actions for Stage 6 of McREL Approach

McREL Actions	Site Actions

• Focus team's efforts on sustainability
    ➢ Review indicators of sustainability with the team
    ➢ Assist team in determining their status related to the indicators of sustainability
 	
• Assist team with developing a sustainability plan
 	
• Work collaboratively with the school team to develop a plan for handing-off the responsibility for leading improvement to the team/school and exiting the site
    ➢ Determine appropriate ways to communicate with the site during the transition
    ➢ Determine ways to connect the site with resources
    ➢ Determine ways in which McREL might be able to involve the site in mentoring other sites (e.g., co-authoring articles, making presentations at conferences)
	• Gather data to determine the extent to which the school has institutionalized structures and processes to support sustainability of improvement efforts
	
	• Develop and implement a sustainability plan
	    ➢ Determine ways to connect with others for sharing successes and learning
	
	• Work collaboratively with change agent to develop a plan for assuming full responsibility for leading improvement efforts in the school
	    ➢ Determine what assistance will be needed during the transition period
	    ➢ Determine ways to connect with others for sharing successes and learning

TESTING THE INITIAL FRAMEWORK

As McREL staff began their work with low-performing schools with the intent of developing a formal school improvement intervention, they had access to a number of McREL products and training materials that they could use to assist schools in addressing some of the variables that affect student achievement (e.g., alignment, instructional strategies). Staff were also able to draw upon their prior experience in working with low-performing schools. Nonetheless, there was much to be learned about the process of assisting schools in developing a professional learning community and sharing leadership for school improvement.

To test the initial framework and associated materials and processes, early in 2002, McREL began working with a consortium of four schools in South Dakota. These schools had been designated as "school improvement" schools because they had not made adequate yearly progress under Title I regulations. South Dakota state education agency (SEA) and McREL staff agreed that, in addition to providing an opportunity to pilot test elements of the McREL Approach, work in these schools 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. By early 2003, McREL staff also were working in schools in Kansas, which provided a different context in which to test the Approach's tools and strategies.

The following sections describe how McREL staff pilot tested various tools and strategies associated with the six stages of the McREL Approach, and what was learned as a result.

GETTING STARTED: TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR STAGE 1

Consistent with the focus of the first stage of the McREL Approach, McREL asked the schools identified by the South Dakota SEA to complete an application that would help us gauge their level of commitment to participate in the project, support for change, and experience with change. Schools submitted the following items as part of the application process:

- A completed 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 past strategies used to address these needs

- A description of how the school leadership team members were selected

- A brief description of what each team member contributes 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 had been developed)

A rubric was developed to evaluate the applications. The evaluation criteria are intended to assess (1) the 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 conducted 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 effort), how staff members deal with conflict, priority needs, the school's professional development program, level of support among staff for participating in the project, and staff members' attitudes 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 and the issues they faced when McREL began working with them are provided in Exhibit 8.

Exhibit 8. School Improvement Sites – South Dakota

Schools	Demographics	Issues
Rural Elementary A	180 students 99% White 1% All others 23% free/reduced-price lunch	• No experience with school improvement process • Lack of collaborative culture • Lack of understanding about how to use formative assessments to adjust instruction
Rural Elementary B	180 students 2% Native American 98% White 49% free/reduced-price lunch	• No experience with school improvement process including data analysis and use • Lack of knowledge about how to develop an effective professional development plan • Limited capacity for developing purposeful community • Lack of alignment between curriculum, instruction, and standards
Rural Middle School	100 students 1% Asian 1% Hispanic 2% Native American 96% White 47% free/reduced-price lunch	• No experience with the school improvement process, including data analysis and use • Limited capacity for developing purposeful community • Lack of knowledge about how to develop an effective professional development plan • Lack of alignment between curriculum, instruction, and standards

Rural K–8 School	100 students 100% Native American 96% free/reduced-price lunch	• Significantly low reading and math scores • Limited capacity for shared leadership • Limited experience with school improvement planning and use of data

At the same time that McREL was beginning its work in South Dakota, staff were talking with Kansas SEA staff and leaders from an urban district in Kansas. McREL agreed to work with this mid-sized district to help its leaders understand how they could assist their low-performing schools ensure that all teachers were effectively teaching to standards. The district serves approximately 50,000 students; 8 percent of its students are Native American or Asian; 18 percent, Hispanic; 24 percent, African American; and 50 percent, White. A total of 61 percent of the district's students are economically disadvantaged.

To gather initial information about this district and its schools, McREL staff used a slightly different strategy. As in the South Dakota case, McREL staff began with a presentation about the McREL Approach to district leaders. This presentation was followed by a number of phone conversations which helped to clarify the district's concern about the lack of implementation of standards-based education. Next, McREL staff visited the district and conducted interviews with principals and teachers to determine the extent and possible causes of the lack of standards implementation at the classroom level.

Stage 1 Findings

Our experiences in working with schools in Stage 1 of the McREL Approach underscored the need for using multiple methods to gather initial information about the site's readiness to engage in improvement efforts. It also became clear that gaining information can be hampered by bureaucracy or inadequate communication within a school or district. Specific findings from Stage 1 work include the following:

Finding 1: Gathering information about support for the improvement effort through written forms may provide an incomplete or inaccurate picture. McREL consultants designed or adapted several data collection 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, it became clear during the on-site interviews 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 quite a different picture. Many teachers did not know about the project, or they were given no choice about participating.

Finding 2: Sites might not have the capacity to accurately complete forms used for gathering information. Some of the forms used to gather information from the sites were quite lengthy and requested very detailed information. Many of the sites had difficulty completing the forms. On-site interviews revealed that sometimes respondents did not understand the questions; in other cases, the format of the questions did not permit an adequate demonstration of what they did understand about the change process and school improvement.

Finding 3: Local leadership teams tend to overestimate their experience with school improvement and change efforts in general. Generally, the members of leadership teams 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. But their frame of reference is limited because their experience is usually with incremental change. As a result, teams rarely understand the scope and nature of the changes that they will need to make if their goal is to help all students succeed. When they do fully understand, teams frequently become overwhelmed by the task and have difficulty selecting an appropriate starting point for their work.

SETTING THE STAGE: TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR STAGE 2

During Stage 2, McREL and site leaders use the information gathered during Stage 1 to determine possible starting points for the improvement effort. They discuss how site strengths and current initiatives can be leveraged to get the new effort off the ground and the resource commitments necessary to ensure success of the endeavor. This stage also focuses on clarifying roles and responsibilities of all involved as well as the systemic and systematic nature of the work. The communication that is modeled in this stage helps to create the conditions necessary to openly discuss important issues that will arise during the course of the relationship between McREL and the site.

The South Dakota site work illustrates the strategy of leveraging current initiatives to determine the starting point for the improvement effort. Each of the South Dakota schools had been identified by the state as a school "in need of improvement" and, as a result, had to submit a school improvement plan to the state. The schools had limited or no experience with school improvement planning, and the deadline for submitting the plan was fast approaching. Given this deadline, school and district administrators in each site requested that the initial work focus on developing a school improvement plan. The initial work also addressed the development of data analysis skills because data feature prominently in school improvement planning, and the sites had limited skills for analyzing and using data.

The Kansas site exemplifies another strategy — presentation and discussion of a formal report. As described previously, during Stage 1, McREL staff conducted interviews with principals and teachers in the district to determine the extent of implementation of standards-based education. McREL staff prepared and presented a report to the leadership team that included findings from the interviews and recommendations for next steps. During the presentation, McREL staff and the leadership team discussed the findings and recommendations. The team decided to focus their work with McREL on clarifying the district's vision and understanding of standards-based education and developing a plan for systematically implementing standards in the district.

McREL staff worked with the Kansas district leadership team for about a year to address these issues. With McREL's assistance, the team designed and delivered professional development to help principals understand the basic concepts of standards-based education. The team also examined district policies and practices related to school improvement planning. As a result of this examination, the leadership team decided that it was time for McREL to work directly with a group of low-performing schools in the district. District leaders wanted McREL's work in the district 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. Before beginning work with these schools, McREL staff visited each one to meet the principal and provide a brief explanation of the purpose of McREL's work with the school and the intended outcomes. McREL staff also talked with the principals before the first site visit, shared the agenda for the meeting, and answered any of the principal's questions. Exhibit 9 provides demographic data and issues for the participating schools in Kansas.

Exhibit 9. School Improvement Sites – Kansas

Schools	Demographics	Issues
Urban Elementary A	384 students 58% African American 1% Asian/Pacific Islander 5% Hispanic 2% Native American 34% White 80% free/reduced-price lunch	Limited capacity for shared leadership Limited teacher collaboration Limited understanding of the need for and nature of district's standards-based reform efforts Many staff willing to change, but many resisting change
Urban Elementary B	588 students 23% African American 27% Hispanic 33% White 17% Other 84% free/reduced-price lunch	Limited understanding of how to interpret and use state and district assessment results Limited understanding of and capacity for shard leadership Limited use of research-based instructional strategies "Weak" school culture
Urban Elementary C	481 students 17% African American 15% Asian/Pacific Islander 46% Hispanic 22% White 85% free/reduced-price lunch	Steady decline in student achievement Lack of a culture of collaboration Lack of understanding of the team's role in school improvement Limited use of data to monitor individual student progress Lack of instructional coherence
Urban Elementary D	450 students 30% African American 7% Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American 10% Hispanic 53% White 82% free/reduced-price lunch	Limited leadership team skills Lack of capacity for shared leadership Low levels of collective efficacy Lack of understanding about role of the leadership team and what it could accomplish
Urban Elementary E	360 students 35% African American 14% Hispanic 3% Native American 48% White 87% free/reduced-price lunch	Achievement below desired level and improvement trends flat Lack of a culture of collaboration; "Private practice" prevalent. Few structures in place to support whole-school change

Schools	Demographics	Issues
		Lack of instructional coherence related to reading instruction "Weak" school culture; lack of trust and teacher accountability Lack of a system for using formative assessments for monitoring individual student progress and adjusting instruction Limited use of data Lack of understanding about what the leadership team can accomplish
Urban Middle A	804 students 12% Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American 32% African American 25% Hispanic 31% White 79% free/reduced-price lunch	Limited involvement of staff in the school improvement process. Lack of ownership and shared responsibility among staff for improving student achievement. Lack of understanding of the leadership team's role in school improvement and what they could accomplish Limited capacity for shared leadership Significant achievement gap between African-American and White students. Limited capacity for using data to guide improvement efforts Limited understanding of district initiatives related to standards-based education
Urban Middle B	538 students 30% African American 9% Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American 20% Hispanic 41% White 78% free/reduced-price lunch	Limited level of collaboration among teachers Limited understanding and use of data for school improvement Limited understanding of the role of the leadership team Limited understanding of district initiatives related to school improvement Chronically low student performance
Urban High A	1,684 students 19% African American 5% Asian/Pacific Islander 11% Hispanic 3% Native American 62% White 53% free/reduced-price lunch	Limited understanding of the need for and importance of district's initiatives related to standards-based education Limited use of shared leadership Many staff willing to change, but also many resistors Limited teacher collaboration

The strategy used to determine the starting point in each of these schools was to focus the leadership team on the strengths of the school's staff and strategies that were working to improve student achievement. At the first meeting with the leadership team in each school, McREL staff engaged the team 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.

Stage 2 Findings

Working with sites in Stage 2 heightened McREL's awareness of the difficulties in determining a starting point for the work and the influence of the starting point on the progress of the work. Findings also emphasized the importance of formalizing agreements about roles, responsibilities, and resource commitments of all involved.

Finding 1: How a starting point for the improvement work is selected can influence commitment to the work. Leadership team members often find it difficult to commit to a starting point for the work if it is based on external pressure or requirements. Low-performing schools often need to complete paperwork (e.g., school improvement plans) to satisfy district or state requirements. If team members perceive this as the reason the team exists, they often have low levels of commitment to the effort. In addition, if the focus is on paperwork, team members might feel that there is no longer a need for the team to meet once the paperwork is completed. The team is likely to struggle to understand its role and the concept of continuous improvement.

Finding 2: School leaders often rush to identify the nature and scope of the work with the change agent without considering data or contextual factors. Low-performing schools are under pressure to improve their performance and often are reacting to outside pressures when they make decisions about their work with the change agent. They make their selection based on what seems most urgent. In some instances, schools find it difficult to identify the scope of work because they are faced with many challenges, all of which seem urgent. School leaders often find it difficult to focus on the big picture of the work (e.g., improving school culture) because they are overwhelmed with a myriad of small problems on a daily basis. These concerns need to be addressed early in the process.

Finding 3: It is important to formalize agreements about the nature and scope of the work, resource commitments, and responsibilities. Although school and district staff might have experience working with staff development providers, they often are unaccustomed to entering into long-term, formal relationships with change agents. When there is no formal agreement about roles and responsibilities, resource commitments, and the nature and scope of the work, the people involved in the relationship might not remember what they promised upfront. This can lead to misunderstandings, resentment, and other negative results. A formal agreement lends credibility to the effort and introduces the idea of accountability early in the process.

DEVELOPING THE PLAN : TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR STAGE 3

The focus in Stage 3 is on decisions about the specifics of what the team will do and how it will accomplish its work. This stage includes a review of information about the status of the site in relation to the use of practices (e.g., research-based instructional strategies, aligned

curriculum) that affect student achievement, and the structures (e.g., professional development committees) and processes (e.g., making decisions, using data, solving problems) needed to support the improvement work. All of this information is used to determine where the school should focus its improvement efforts and the strengths upon which it can build in moving forward with those efforts. During this stage, the leadership team develops a plan for improvement and learns the basics of how to function effectively as a team.

The first step in this stage is to help the school establish a leadership team, if one does not exist. Next, McREL staff meets with the leadership team and explains the McREL Approach and its broad goals and outcomes. During this meeting, McREL staff and the leadership team members discuss the roles and responsibilities of McREL and leadership team members. In addition, they talk about the composition of the team to determine if the right people to get the work done are involved, how frequently the team will meet, and how the meetings with McREL will be organized.

The primary strategy for working with the leadership teams in the South Dakota and Kansas schools consisted of monthly on-site visits. The length of each site visit varied depending on conditions at the site. In general, a site visit consisted 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 provided opportunities for McREL staff to coach principals on such topics as working effectively with the leadership team and understanding district school improvement policies. During these meetings, McREL staff members also lent moral support to the principals, helped them understand issues that were blocking progress, and encouraged principals to take action to advance the team's work.

Over time, the frequency of meetings with the leadership team decreased in some of the sites, and who McREL staff met with also varied. For example, in one Kansas school, McREL staff worked with all the school's staff on some visits and with only the leadership team on other visits.

In addition to the monthly scheduled meetings with McREL staff, the South Dakota schools also met as a group twice per year for two days. During those sessions, McREL staff presented information and engaged teams in activities to deepen their understanding of school improvement planning, data use, leadership, change, instructional strategies, or other topics related to the school and teacher practices associated with student achievement. Teams also shared successful strategies and provided feedback to one another about proposed strategies for strengthening the professional learning community in their schools or implementing and evaluating school improvement strategies.

During Stage 3, teams learn the nuts and bolts of being a team and running an effective meeting. These skills include establishing or refining norms and ground rules for meetings and carrying out various roles, such as recorder, summarizer, and facilitator. One strategy for helping teams acquire team skills was modeling. For example, in the early stages of the team's development, a McREL staff member usually served as the facilitator and, sometimes, as the summarizer during meetings. Over time, these functions were assumed by leadership team members. Teams also learned how to develop an agenda, run meetings, and accommodate

members' different communication styles. McREL staff also modeled how to develop an agenda that specified the purpose and outcomes for the meeting, how to use small and large group activities to encourage broad and meaningful participation in discussions, how to include a variety of activities (e.g., simulations, World Café, jigsaw reading, discussion protocols, book study) to stimulate discussion and reflection, how to use techniques such as the "parking lot" to keep meetings on track, and how to capture agreements about actions between meetings.

Tools used to support teams in this aspect of Stage 3 work included examples of norms and ground rules for meetings and information about brainstorming techniques and various forms of decision making, such as consensus.

Learning the mechanics of running an effective meeting is important, but teams also need to learn what their role is in leading school improvement. Strategies for helping teams develop improvement plans included breaking the process into small steps, guiding teams through each step, posing questions to help the team examine their plan, and providing training to help teams understand how to analyze and use data to set goals for the improvement plan. McREL staff also provided suggestions for and modeled how the leadership team could engage other members of the staff in discussions about the improvement plan to ensure that everyone knew what was in the plan and their role in implementing it.

Tools for assisting teams with understanding their role in developing a school improvement plan included diagrams of the school improvement process (see Exhibit A-4), descriptions of the school improvement team's role and checklists of specific actions for school improvement teams, templates for school improvement plans, and samples of completed school improvement plans. Information related to Covey's (1990) concepts of circle of influence and circle of concern proved to be effective for helping teams focus on development of their school improvement plan. According to Covey, to be effective, people should be proactive rather than reactive. This means focusing on what they can control or influence rather than being victimized by their emotional response to circumstances. In many low-performing schools, teachers feel there are many factors they can not control. This leads to discouragement, frustration, and a tendency to abandon improvement efforts. When teams defined their work around their circle of influence, they made progress with their efforts to improve student performance and became more confident in their ability to make further improvement.

Another strategy used during this stage of the Approach was providing professional development about different types of data, how to analyze data, and how to use data to set goals for improvement and evaluate the effectiveness of improvement strategies. Another strategy was to engage participants in activities that involved data. For example, one activity asked teams to compare the achievement scores of different groups of students. Examining these data created a sense of urgency among team members to address the performance gap that was revealed. Another activity designed to improve teams' data skills was the data retreat. The data retreat is a structured process schools can use to examine state, district, and school level data; form hypotheses about the reasons for student performance revealed by the data; and establish goals and strategies for improvement. Several of the teams learned how to use the materials and process to conduct their own data retreats.

Stage 3 Findings

Working with sites in Stage 3 brought to light teams' concerns about the work, their need for support, and their difficulties in understanding their roles. Findings pointed out teams' need to learn basic skills for running effective meetings and functioning as a team.

Finding 1: It is often difficult for team members to understand the "big picture" of the work. As evident from Exhibit A-4, the school improvement process involves many steps. Each step has several actions. Each action requires certain knowledge and skills. Many of the concepts associated with the work — professional learning community and shared leadership in particular — also have this "nested" quality and may appear abstract and complicated when first encountered. It became clear that understanding the "big picture" of the work is no small task for most teachers and principals.

Finding 2: Team members may have concerns about working with an external change agent. School staff members often do not have experience working with an external change agent in a long-term relationship. They may be concerned about the relationship between the change agent and school and district leaders. For example, they may wonder where the change agent fits in the "power hierarchy" or if the change agent is evaluating them as teachers. They may have questions about the change agent's specific role in the day-to-day life of the school.

Finding 3: It takes a considerable amount of time for teams to understand their role. In most low-performing schools, teachers do not have a history of working together on a team to improve their school. Even if there has been a school improvement team, team members usually are unfamiliar with the concepts of shared leadership and professional learning community. Each of those concepts is complex and requires team members to think about themselves, and how they interact with others, in a different way. In most of the schools, it took a year to a year and a half for teams to fully understand their role.

Finding 4: Communication within a school is often limited. Teachers are frequently isolated from one another as a result of the physical layout of the building, cultural norms in the building, or lack of time for meeting. Even if there are staff meetings, there may not be opportunities during them for teachers to talk with one another about the improvement of teaching and learning. Leadership team members had few, if any, mechanisms or expectations for communicating the work of the leadership team. Often, even when pressed to do so, team members did not follow through on their agreements to inform others about the work of the team. This led other staff members to view the team as "special" or their work as "secret."

Finding 5: Accountability for following up on agreements is difficult to attain in the early stages of a team's work. Most teams have limited experience with holding themselves accountable for following up on agreements made at meetings. In many cases, teams would agree to complete an action between meetings but when the next meeting came, those actions hadn't been taken. This often meant that the team's progress was slowed or that an opportunity for learning or practicing a skill was missed.

Finding 6: Principals need support outside of team meetings. The concepts of shared leadership and professional learning community are as new to most principals as they are to teachers. But, as positional leaders, principals often feel that they need to know more than their

teachers know about these ideas so they can provide guidance. Principals often lack opportunities for professional development or the professional development available does not address these ideas in enough depth over a sufficient period of time for principals to acquire the level of knowledge and skill they need. In some cases, the principal's lack of knowledge and skill might discourage the team's progress. For example, if a principal does not know how to take responsibility for problematic staffing issues, observe classroom instruction for adherence to shared agreements, or shake up the status quo, the team's progress may be limited. The work of leadership is complex and can be physically and emotionally draining. Sometimes the principal lacks the needed moral support.

Finding 7: Teachers seem reluctant to see themselves as leaders. McREL's work with teams is designed to foster teacher leadership and join it with principal leadership for the benefit of students. Teachers play a key role in school improvement, yet they seem reluctant to see themselves as leaders in this effort. This reluctance seems to stem in part from teachers' and principals' assumptions about the other's role in the school. Traditional views of the principal's role are hard to change.

Finding 8: Changes in team membership can help or hinder the team's progress. Some teams experienced a great deal of turnover in membership because teachers or the principal moved to a new town or new school. In some cases, these changes brought new life to the team, but in others they stifled progress. This was particularly true when several members left the team at the same time — getting new members "up to speed" was akin to starting from square one. There was also turnover in McREL staff for a variety of reasons. In some cases, this was upsetting for teams because they had to adjust to different facilitation styles and the dynamics of the group changed.

Finding 9: Teams are likely to lack knowledge and skills related to the nuts and bolts of running leadership team meetings. Although most teachers have worked on a variety of committees, they may lack the experience or skills to organize and carry out the work that the leadership team needs to complete to accomplish its goals. When teachers lack skills, they are likely to permit, or expect, the principal to "take charge." This limits the team's capacity to function successfully over the long run.

Finding 10: Teams tend to focus on issues that they are concerned about rather than on issues over which they have some control. When teams assess the strengths and needs of the school, members often want to 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, or lack of parent involvement). In some cases, this reflects team members' reluctance to consider their own practice as a starting point for improvement. Focusing on issues that are in the team's "circle of concern" versus its "circle of influence" can stifle the improvement process.

Finding 11: Data can be powerful in helping teams 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 that 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.

Finding 12: Teams have limited knowledge of different types of data and how to use them. For the most part, teams are most familiar with state assessment data. Even so, they often have limited experience in analyzing those data at any depth or in using them to inform decisions about improvement goals or instructional programs. Few teams know how to use perception data, such as school climate surveys, or program data, such as teacher self-report data about their use of specific instructional strategies, to shed light on outcome data. Similarly, demographic data, such as attendance rates, are often used as "excuses" for poor student performance rather than as a starting point for conversations about reasons for poor attendance and what can be done about it.

LAUNCHING THE PLAN: TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR STAGE 4

During Stage 4, the team works with the rest of the staff to carry out the strategies in the improvement plan. They focus their work as a team on learning how to establish a purposeful community and help staff deal with the implications of the changes that are part of the improvement plan. They also learn how to apply the concept of shared leadership, establish structures and processes to support long-term improvement, and develop a system for monitoring and evaluating their improvement efforts.

Much of the work with teams during this stage focused on improving communication, both within the team and between the team and other members of the faculty. 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. Although protocols were helpful in many situations, McREL staff also found that in other situations it was equally effective to facilitate an open discussion and identify action steps. Engaging teams in activities that highlighted the importance of good communication to the effective functioning of the team was also a useful strategy.

Another strategy McREL used to address communication was raising the issue of team membership. This became an issue for several of the teams because staff transferred to another school or retired. This presented an opportunity to discuss how team members should be selected, terms of service, and the role that former team members can play in supporting the work of the leadership team. For example, as new members join the team and prior members rotate out of it, 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.

Another aspect of Stage 4 work relates to building trust. Without trust, team members aren't likely to engage in the honest and frank discussions about closely held beliefs that they

need to have to accomplish their work. Likewise, in order for McREL staff to be able to make the kinds of suggestions that will advance the team's work — and for the team to accept these suggestions without defensiveness or rancor — there must be a significant level of trust. To help teams understand the significance of culture, McREL staff engaged teams in a number of activities, such as constructing a visual map of the school's history, and provided them with information about what is meant by school culture and ways to develop positive culture. McREL staff also provided teams with opportunities to articulate their beliefs about curriculum, instruction, and other aspects of schooling and to review rubrics that described effective classroom environments.

Similarly, McREL staff encouraged development of collaborative skills by (1) engaging teams in hands-on activities (e.g., the Tent Pole activity) that raise questions about how well teams work together, (2) providing information that expands the team's thinking about issues that are causing conflict on the team or within the school, and (3) assisting with the development or refinement of structures for collaborative learning, such as study groups and grade-level or cross-grade-level team meetings.

To successfully implement a viable school improvement plan, leadership team members must understand the change process and learn to effectively manage change. McREL provided information that helped teams differentiate between change and transition. This information also helped them understand the phases of transition (see, e.g., Bridges, 1991, 2003) — from acknowledging the ending of the old way, to struggling with the uncertainty during the time when neither the old way nor the new ways work, to accepting and committing to the new way — and why they and their colleagues react to proposed changes in predictable ways. Discussing these transition phases and identifying action steps for working through each phase provided the leadership teams with a common language to use to express any frustration and provided a plan for easing the transition as they moved their work forward.

McREL staff also illustrated 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. An example of such a tool is the Leadership Team Planning Template. This tool 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.

At the core of implementing an improvement plan is increasing teachers' knowledge of instructional strategies. One way McREL staff helped teams accomplish this was by providing study packets that study groups could use to learn about and examine their use of research-based instructional strategies. Another way was by teaching team members how to use a tool called the Student Intervention Matrix. This tool provides a way for leadership teams to identify specific students in the school who are performing below the proficient level and highlights the instructional strategies that teachers have used with these students.

A variety of tools and strategies were used to help teams understand their role in establishing a professional learning community. One strategy was to engage teams in a book study using *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*

(Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). McREL staff structured conversations about the book using specific guidelines for discussion, also known as protocols. In addition, McREL facilitators asked teams to use a tool called the Professional Learning Community Continuum, included in the book, to assess the extent to which their school exhibited the characteristics of a professional learning community. McREL staff also provided examples and stories of how other leadership teams established a professional learning community and then posed questions as prompts for team members to brainstorm ideas about their role.

In some of the schools, we used a technique called World Café, which is a conversation structured in a particular way to expand participants' thinking and understanding about a topic. 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. Although teams did not always achieve clarity about their role as a result of the World Café, they did find the technique useful for surfacing and understanding one another's ideas and beliefs.

Another way McREL helped teams understand their role in establishing a purposeful community was by defining clusters of leadership responsibilities. This made the task seem less overwhelming and provided a common language to talk about the actions the teams needed to take. We also involved several leadership teams in specific activities related to aspects of professional learning community. For example, we asked the teams to read an article about norms of school culture and to complete a short self-assessment about the extent to which the norms were present in their school. The article provided clear explanations and concrete examples of the elements of school culture and the self-assessment served to catalyze action in several of the schools. The teams led the whole faculty in a similar exercise and used the suggestions the staff provided to prioritize the teams' actions to establish professional learning community.

Other tools piloted during this stage of the McREL Approach included a video that highlighted the difference between mission and vision and provided guidance for developing mission statements that focused on student learning. Other tools took the form of self-assessments. For example, teams used a self-assessment that helped them determine whether their mission statement was "alive" or in need of refinement. Teams were encouraged to make the mission statement visible in the school and use it as a reference point when making decisions that affect students. We developed tools that provided teams with a step-by-step process for creating vision statements that reflected how they wanted their school to look in terms of curriculum, instruction, assessment, support for students and staff, and other areas. We modeled this process for teams and provided guidance as they developed their vision statements.

Stage 4 Findings

Findings from work conducted with schools and districts in Stage 4 highlighted teams' struggles with understanding what is meant by continuous improvement and shared leadership.

They also emphasized the importance of helping teams deal with conflict caused by pressure to complete team assignments or requirements to interact with colleagues in different ways or to meet district demands that conflict with the school's improvement efforts.

Finding 1: Frequency of meetings can affect a team's progress and its perception of the connection of the team's work to school and district initiatives. In the early stages of the Approach, when teams are struggling to understand the work and their role in it, they might not see the connection between work on the school improvement plan and professional learning community and other school and district initiatives. This is particularly true if most team members have not been involved in developing or implementing a school improvement plan in the past. A great deal happens at the school between meetings and if the team does not follow up on assigned tasks or meet on its own between sessions with McREL, the sense of disconnect between team meetings and the daily life of the school might increase for some members of the team. In addition, teams that do not meet outside the meetings with McREL tend to make less progress than those who meet at least occasionally on their own.

Finding 2: Team members often find it difficult to understand what the ultimate outcomes of the work will be. Many team members have little knowledge of or experience with sustaining improvements. For the most part, teachers have experienced change without results. When a new idea is introduced, many respond with, "this too shall pass." Others greet "new" ideas as something they've experienced before — just under a different name. The ultimate goal of the McREL Approach is to teach the school how to identify and address challenges independently. In other words, school personnel will have the ability to sustain the progress they have made and continue to improve. Teachers may be used to the idea of continuous change but not that of continuous improvement. It takes time for them to understand what continuous improvement entails.

Finding 3: Each school site is affected by its unique traditions, context, and culture; these factors may affect the group's ability to complete its work. In some schools, traditional gender roles may limit the willingness or opportunities for teachers to provide leadership. In other schools, staff members who have worked for a long time under a strong leader may find that they need extra assistance in developing skills in the area of shared leadership.

Finding 4: When the team begins its work, members often need coaching or assistance in learning to follow through on assignments. Teachers may have had experience working on committees where follow through wasn't required or expected. In some instances, team members wait for someone else to take responsibility. In other instances, team members do not follow through because work on the leadership team has been added on to their already full plates, and they simply do not have enough time to complete the task. Some adopt an attitude of "I'll do it — *if* I have time."

Finding 5: It is difficult to establish shared leadership. Principals may interpret shared leadership as simply turning responsibility for meetings, school improvement planning, and other actions over to the leadership team. However, the principal still must fulfill critical responsibilities that cannot be fulfilled by others. These include responsibilities that are part of the principal's positional authority and those that relate to establishing a purposeful community. Among these are recognizing and celebrating legitimate successes of individuals and the school

as a whole, being visible and accessible to teachers, students, and parents, attending to and fostering relationships with the staff, and providing an optimistic view of what the school is doing and what it can accomplish (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Teachers and principals are often unclear about their roles in a shared leadership situation and need help in understanding what the expectations are.

Finding 6: Actions taken at the district level may heavily impact improvement efforts at the school level. During the course of the work, districts may initiate new improvement efforts, change organizational structures, implement new accountability measures, or change personnel. These actions have the potential to either enhance or disrupt the improvement initiatives at the school level.

Finding 7: Teachers need to learn how to hold professional and collegial discussions that may involve disagreement. Teachers have traditionally worked together in congenial rather than collegial environments and often find it difficult to raise issues about colleagues' teaching. In general, teachers try to avoid conversations that might cause conflicts or bring conflicts to light.

Finding 8: Focusing initial improvement efforts on too large a problem area is overwhelming for teams and can lead to abandoning the effort before any progress is made. When teams analyze data and set improvement goals, they often take on too big an initiative because they want their efforts to make a big difference. Unfortunately, in the early stages of the team's work, team members and other staff usually do not have the supportive culture or skills needed to accomplish such an ambitious goal. Nonetheless, it is difficult to convince teams that it is better to start small.

Finding 9: Teams need help operationalizing the strategies included in their improvement plans. Many times, teachers find it difficult to determine exactly what it looks like to implement improvement strategies in their classrooms. Sometimes this is because the strategy is written in a confusing format or unfamiliar terminology**.** Other times, the strategy does not seem to be connected to what the teacher perceives as the problem or the teacher does not believe the strategy is an effective one. Teams often fail to plan for implementation and do not account for the problems that teachers may have in understanding how to implement the strategies.

Finding 10: Teachers may be reluctant to engage in professional conversations. Teachers seemed reluctant to engage in conversations that involved commenting on a colleague's practice. This was true if they knew one another well or if they hardly knew one another. In the latter case, teachers didn't feel comfortable giving or receiving feedback from people they didn't know. Teachers might also perceive such conversations to be "a waste of time" if they do not clearly understand the purpose of the conversation.

Finding 11: Using protocols, or guidelines for conversations, helps teachers overcome their resistance to engaging in professional conversations; it can take considerable time for the resistance to diminish. In fact, in some situations it was necessary to use a particular protocol several times or to try different protocols before teachers' reluctance diminished. McREL staff also found 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.

Finding 12: *Setting aside time for collaborative work during the school day is possibly the most important change a school can make.* As members of one school's leadership team noted, the weekly collaborative learning meetings led to collective, rather than individual, efforts to improve student achievement. 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. In addition, teams may need encouragement, and at times, prodding to persevere when initial attempts at collaborative work meet with resistance.

TRACKING PROGRESS: TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR STAGE 5

The focus of Stage 5 is on monitoring the success of improvement strategies as well as the team's capacity to lead school improvement, maintain a purposeful community, and manage the second-order implications of change. The team learns the importance of collecting and using formative data to track the progress of individual students as well as the school's progress toward meeting improvement goals. Team members also learn how to make adjustments to policies, practices, strategies, and structures based on data about the effectiveness of improvement strategies.

One way McREL helped teams monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their improvement efforts was to introduce the notion of a "design team." 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.

Another way McREL helped teams use data to monitor and evaluate their progress was by modeling how different types of data can serve these purposes. For example, McREL guided one school's leadership team through a process for analyzing 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.

One of the tools pilot tested during Stage 5 was a questionnaire that addressed how well the team communicated among its members and with other members of the staff. Staff not on the leadership team completed a similar questionnaire. By comparing the results of the two questionnaires, teams got a "reality check" about how well they were communicating and developed new ways to communicate with staff as a result.

Tracking progress allows teams to identify strategies that are working as well as those that aren't. Teams often tend to focus on what isn't working, but celebrating accomplishments helps encourage those involved in change efforts to persevere. A large part of McREL's work with leadership team members was helping them see the need to celebrate their accomplishments. McREL modeled ways that teams can celebrate their accomplishments along

the way to their larger goals, provided information explaining the importance of celebrations, and provided team members with strategies to document the school's accomplishments.

Stage 5 Findings

Work in Stage 5 brought attention to the difficulties teams encounter in putting monitoring systems into practice and accentuated teams' lack of knowledge, skill, and, in some cases, disposition to hold themselves accountable for their work. Findings in this stage also pointed out the importance of structures for conversations about data, celebrating accomplishments, and using data formatively as well as summatively.

Finding 1: Structured discussions around formative assessments can be at the core of the improvement process. When teachers meet regularly to discuss formative assessments of individual students and groups of students, they accomplish several purposes. These discussions provide a forum for

- Defining agreed-upon levels of student proficiency for all involved

- Judging the efficacy of the teaching strategies being used

- Sharing alternative instructional strategies that, when implemented, might prove to be more effective

- Offering "just in time" staff development in which teachers can share strategies that have worked in other, similar situations.

- Creating benchmarks for measuring progress toward meeting school-wide summative assessment goals by aggregating the progress of individual students

- Coordinating the effective use of resources (financial, teacher time, etc.) and reallocating resources if necessary

It is important that a structured format be in place for these discussions and that the procedures for carrying out the discussions be modeled and practiced. The discussions should also be monitored, either by the participants or other school leaders, to ensure that the time is used for the purposes and outcomes delineated above.

Finding 2: Reviewing where the team has been and where they are, before moving forward, helps team members stay grounded. Because some team members may have been absent and McREL staff are not present in the school on a day-to-day basis, there needs to be time set aside at each meeting to "catch up" on what happened between meetings. In addition, reviewing what happened between meetings presents opportunities for the team to focus on monitoring progress on an ongoing basis. These conversations also provide opportunities to address any concerns, questions, or situations that have surfaced. When team members are able to answer these questions for one another, the team's sense of efficacy begins to build.

Finding 3: Teams need strategies for holding themselves accountable. As mentioned previously, teams generally are not accustomed to being held accountable for completing tasks and following through on agreements. In some cases this is because no specific individual is

assigned to or accepts responsibility for making sure the tasks are completed. In other cases, people do not follow through on agreements because they discover after the meeting that they really didn't understand the task or that they don't have the skills to complete the task. Teams also avoid discussions of accountability because such discussions might cause conflicts among team members.

Finding 4: Teams have limited experience celebrating success. Because few teams have monitored progress along the way to accomplishing their larger goals, they are not accustomed to celebrating small successes along the way. Some members do not believe that there is anything to celebrate until the final goal is reached. Others might not understand the importance of celebration and its connection to collective efficacy and motivation to persevere.

Finding 5: Monitoring and evaluating strategies is difficult for teams to understand in the early stages of the work. Teams go through developmental stages, acquiring knowledge and skills related to the school improvement process over time. Monitoring and evaluating skills develop later in the process, after teams are comfortable with identifying and implementing strategies. Few of the teams that worked with McREL reached the point of addressing whether feedback was being used effectively for system improvement and whether the monitoring and evaluation system needed to be refined. In fact, these teams barely addressed these aspects of improvement.

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM: TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR STAGE 6

As described previously, the McREL Approach was designed to build teams' capacity for continuous improvement. Accordingly, 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. During Stage 6 of the process, McREL staff help leadership team members focus on those skills and other elements of sustainability. Teams assess the extent to which they have addressed those elements and develop a plan for ensuring that they have the appropriate structures and processes in place to sustain improvement efforts.

McREL staff members attended 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? Another strategy McREL used in the later stages of the work with some teams was to engage them in a performance task that allowed the teams to demonstrate their capacity to solve improvement-related problems on their own.

McREL staff developed several tools to help teams think about sustainability. One of these tools, the *Leadership Folio Series: Sustaining School Improvement* (McREL, 2003) includes rubrics that teams can use to assess the extent to which the team understands and uses the strategies listed for each component (i.e., professional learning community, data-driven decisions, professional development, resource allocation, communication) related to sustainability.

Stage 6 Findings

Findings in Stage 6 center on the importance of identifying outcomes and knowing how to use resources to effectively support sustainability.

Finding 1: For schools that have instructional resource teachers, professional developers, or mentors, a key for sustaining improvements is to involve these assets from the beginning. When these key people have been involved in all stages of the improvement process, they know the team, the work, and the plan of action. They may play a larger role in the team's work as the change agent prepares to exit. Explicit planning and communication needs to be in place so that these internal change agents and the rest of the team know how the roles of certain team members may change.

Finding 2: Developing sustainability goals/outcomes early in the process helps everyone know what is expected at the end of the process. Sustainability goals and their associated indicators define the ultimate outcome of the work that is done together by the school and the advisory team. By jointly identifying the sustainability outcomes early in the process and communicating them to all stakeholders, everyone has a clearer picture of what will be accomplished.

Finding 3: Documenting resources and processes used during the various stages of the Approach makes it easier for teams to use these resources and processes after the change agent leaves. Teams often get lost in the flood of information provided. Providing explicit instructions for activities and resources and illustrating how teams can use specific strategies helps them assume responsibility for the work.

Finding 4: Including paraprofessionals in professional development provided to staff supports sustainability. Paraprofessionals support instruction that teachers provide and need to understand the research-based instructional strategies that teachers are using. Because they work closely with students, they can help to implement strategies and provide information about the effectiveness of those strategies. They also provide a vital link to the community and can serve as advocates for the school's improvement efforts and share stories of the school's success.

RESULTS OF APPLYING THE APPROACH IN SOUTH DAKOTA AND KANSAS

What difference does the McREL Approach make for schools who participate in the process? Members of leadership teams in the South Dakota schools and six schools in Kansas were surveyed in 2005 about the results of their work with McREL. The remaining two Kansas schools were not surveyed because no work was conducted in them during 2005. Leadership team members were asked to rate the extent to which their knowledge or skills in a number of areas had increased. Exhibits 10a and 10b illustrate the changes that occurred in these sites.

Exhibit 10a. Results of Applying McREL Approach in South Dakota and Kansas Schools

Area of Improvement	Mean*
Understanding of research-based instructional strategies	3.91
Use of research-based instructional strategies	3.95
Knowledge of how to use assessment data to determine how to adjust instruction for a class or specific students	4.35
Understanding of how to develop a professional learning community	4.02
Knowledge about how to develop and implement a school improvement plan	3.79
Skills for using data to make decisions for school improvement	3.85
Skills for finding new strategies to improve student achievement	3.93
Leadership skills	3.74
View of self as a leader	3.68

*Stem: To what extent _____ increased as a result of work with McREL
Scale: 5 = To a great extent; 1 = To no extent
Mean is across all sites.

Exhibit 10b. Results of Applying McREL Approach in South Dakota and Kansas Schools

Area of Improvement	Mean*
Improvement initiatives are specifically focused on student-related outcomes	3.54
Improving student achievement is seen as everyone's responsibility	3.65
Communication with parents about students' academics	3.11
School expects high levels of performance from all staff	3.30
Recognize the accomplishments of students and staff at the school	3.29
Collaborative working environment among teachers that involves consulting and sharing about instructional practices	3.57
Good communication between leadership team and other staff in the school	3.32
Teachers have a culture of using data in their classroom	3.53
Professional development supports school improvement plan implementation	3.63
There is a shared vision of school improvement	3.74
Members of leadership team understand the purpose of their work as members of the team	3.86
Knowledge about what the leadership teams needs to do to promote the use of data for school improvement	3.66

*Stem: Extent to which the practice improved as a result of your school's work with McREL
Scale: 5 = To a great extent; 1 = To no extent

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING APPLICATION OF THE APPROACH

Key recommendations that will be incorporated in the McREL Approach as a result of the findings during the pilot testing of the framework materials and strategies are presented in this section. Some of the recommendations are general in nature, cutting across several stages or pertaining to processes used by the change agent. These appear under the heading "General Recommendations." The rest of the recommendations are organized by the stages of the McREL Approach.

General Recommendations

1. Be aware that the school improvement work can affect relationships and the culture within the site in unintended ways.

2. Pair change agents to work with leadership teams in ways that provide a diversity of skills, experience, and styles.

3. Use subtle as well as direct approaches to raise uncomfortable issues and "make the invisible, visible;" in the early stages of the work teams often benefit from direct suggestions for concrete tasks, but more subtle approaches for raising issues.

4. Continually question the decisions and responses that people make by raising their expectations and challenging assumptions.

5. Model open, honest, and straightforward communication; don't beat around the bush when it comes to raising difficult issues that need to be discussed.

6. When approached by members of the team who are trying to enlist your assistance or seeking your support for their point of view against someone within the system, express concern, but do not get drawn into conflicts and personnel issues. Model ways to surface and address conflict.

7. Use specific tools (e.g., site visit summary forms) and processes (monthly debriefing sessions to share strategies and engage in learning with colleagues) to learn from the school intervention work.

Stage 1 Recommendations — Getting Started

1. Schedule on-site interviews to gather accurate information about readiness for change.

2. Ensure that tools for gathering information are simple and in formats that can adequately capture potential participants' levels of knowledge, skills, and experience.

Stage 2 Recommendations — Setting the Stage

1. Use visual representations to help teams understand the work of school improvement and their role in it.

2. Clearly communicate that the team's job is to lead school improvement and establish a professional learning community.

3. Discuss accountability early in the relationship.

Stage 3 Recommendations — Developing the Plan

1. Provide clear guidance on leadership team membership.

2. Explicitly discuss the role of stability of membership on the leadership team.

3. Clarify leadership roles.

4. Focus the leadership team's energy on the elements of school improvement that the team can influence directly.

5. Use data to energize leadership teams.

6. Simplify tasks and explain them in concrete terms.

7. Align work with the team with their specific needs and school initiatives and know what the district requires and expects of the school.

8. Consider sustainability early in the improvement process.

9. Structure "small scale" experiences with the improvement process that allow the team to successfully accomplish a short-term goal and build confidence in their ability to make a difference in student achievement.

10. Attend to the nuts and bolts of running a meeting.

Stage 4 Recommendations — Launching the Plan

1. Use tools that help teams focus on individual student performance and strategies to assist them.

2. Help teams understand that change takes time and perseverance.

3. Create and monitor "shared agreements."

4. Assist the team in seeing the aspects of their own unique context and culture that affect the way they do their work (and that may limit their success).

5. Address issues of work completion and follow through.

6. Develop the ability of team members to hold professional and collegial discussions that may involve disagreement.

7. Address the issues that shared leadership raises through open and honest communication.

8. Keep district leaders apprised of both the content and the progress of the improvement efforts at the school, and discuss with district personnel ways in which district initiatives currently or may possibly affect the school's efforts.

9. Consider providing differentiated leadership development opportunities for principals and teacher leaders at different levels of the system (i.e., elementary, secondary).

Stage 5 Recommendations — Tracking Progress

1. Remind team members that continual improvement is a process and each step forward needs to be affirmed.

2. Help teams use a structured process for examining data. Encourage them to systematically look for patterns and relationships, summarize strengths and weaknesses, and prioritize weak areas before brain storming possible causes for student performance.

3. Use a variety of methods (e.g., checklists, reflective questions) to help teams monitor their progress and check their status. Be aware that some teams might benefit more from using one method than another.

4. Use opening activities to build relationships among team members and to gauge the "temperature" of the group.

Stage 6 Recommendations— Maintaining Momentum

1. Explicitly plan ways to use the human resources available to the school to help support sustainability of improvement efforts.

2. Use a variety of tools early and often to help leadership team members consider how they will sustain improvement efforts on their own.

3. Develop and use a list of indicators of team capacity (knowledge, skills, attitudes), structures, and processes needed to sustain improvement efforts.

4. Develop sustainability goals/outcomes early in the process and communicate them to all stakeholders.

5. Encourage teams to consider the amount of time they will need to accomplish their goals; have specific conversations about how often and how long they will meet.

SUMMARY: TESTING THE FRAMEWORK

As McREL staff tested elements of the Approach with schools in the Central Region, a number of critical findings came to light. Together, these findings indicate that teams struggle to understand their role as a team and what it means to share leadership. As McREL staff learned, teams need concrete examples and specific guidance to learn how to carry out the tasks of leading school improvement and establishing a purposeful community. Data figure prominently in a number of the stages of the Approach. Although McREL staff provided professional development in data skills, they discovered that teams develop these skills slowly and need many opportunities to learn how to use a variety of data from multiple sources for classroom-level and school-level purposes. The importance of helping teams hold themselves accountable and

address sustainability early in the process also became evident during the pilot test. These and other findings provided valuable information about ways in which to enhance the Approach.

NEXT STEPS

The McREL Approach is now entering a new phase with a new name, *Success in Sight*, which signifies the strength of the approach and the hope that it brings to struggling schools. As we've learned from our study of and experience with collective efficacy, the importance of hope can not be underestimated. By helping schools focus on the practices that are associated with student achievement, understand and manage the transitions that change brings, and build capacity for shared leadership, *Success in Sight* presents a solid approach to improving schools that face a variety of challenges.

The next steps for *Success in Sight* include a program of research, expanding the number and types of schools in which Success in Sight is applied to increase understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, and training others how to use it. Each of these is described in the sections that follow.

PROGRAM OF RESEARCH

There is preliminary evidence from our work with schools in South Dakota and Kansas that the *Success in Sight* process contributes to improvements in student achievement, teacher practice, and leadership capacity. Within the past three years, almost all of the schools in which we used the process have made Adequate Yearly Progress, following one to two years of engaging in the process. Most have been removed from their state or district "needs improvement" list. Some have experienced significant improvements in performance — two of the schools have been designated as National Blue Ribbon schools for those gains and have attained their states' highest designation for performance on state assessments. Members of the leadership teams in all of the schools report increased knowledge and skills related to school improvement planning and implementation and the change process and how to manage it.

Although the components of the framework are research-based, the process itself has not been the subject of research. There are many questions about the various aspects of the process, its application, and its impacts on student achievement that would benefit from research. Some possible research questions include:

1. How should the process be modified for schools at different levels of readiness to engage in the process?

2. Is the process more effective for schools at some levels of readiness than at other levels?

3. How should the process be modified for schools at different levels of the system (elementary, middle, high school)?

4. Is the process more effective with elementary schools or secondary schools?

5. How does the process look when it is applied in a school with a strong principal versus a principal with limited knowledge and skills?

6. What is the relationship between the school or teacher practice that is the initial focus of improvement and the rate and amount of improvement?

SCALING UP AND IMPROVED UNDERSTANDING OF *SUCCESS IN SIGHT* IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Various aspects of the *Success in Sight* framework and process have been used in a number of sites in different states for several years. To date, however, the entire *Success in Sight* process has been implemented only in a limited number of sites. Although these sites have included rural and urban schools at all levels, there has not been a sufficient number of any to fully understand how the tools and strategies might need to vary for different contexts. In particular, we have worked with a limited number of high schools and need to know more about how the process plays out at that level. We will look to the new Comprehensive Center on High Schools for guidance in this area.

The sites in which McREL has implemented the process over the last several years have varied in their level of readiness to engage in the improvement process and in the skill level of their leaders. Nevertheless, the small number of sites has provided limited opportunities for us to fully understand how the process might vary under these different circumstances. The goal, then, is to apply the process in a large number of different school settings in different states. Currently, McREL is talking with a number of states about how this process might be used to help improve their low-performing schools. If these conversations are fruitful, the process will be applied in several hundred more schools.

Another aspect of scaling up is working at the district level to help staff develop coherence and effective feedback systems that encourage and support school improvement efforts. We have ventured a little way down this path with some work in Kansas, and we are learning more through a partnership with Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) and Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), but there is more to learn. We need to apply what we have learned and learn more by working with a large number of different-sized districts.

In addition to scaling up the application of the process, we need to increase our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each stage, as well as our understanding of the tools and strategies we use to carry out the process. For example, we need to understand more about how to help schools monitor and evaluate their improvement strategies and their feedback systems. Most teachers and principals have limited experience using multiple sources and types of data to make adjustments to improvement strategies at the end of a defined period of implementation (e.g., a year) let alone "along the way." We need to understand much more about how to help educators use data formatively at the school level, and most particularly in classrooms.

We also would like to learn more about ways to help schools understand what it takes to plan and sustain improvement efforts over the long haul. We have developed some indicators of sustainability, but need to work with them more to see if they are helpful to schools.

In addition, in several of the sites, our exit from the process didn't proceed as smoothly as it might have. For example, in one school the principal decided over the summer that she no longer wanted us to work with her school, despite the district leader's view that the school would benefit from our involvement for another year. In another school, weather and scheduling problems prevented us from making the last two scheduled visits. Because there were many changes at the site — turnover in leadership and teachers as well as a significant change to the weekly schedule — there was little interest in rescheduling the visits. McREL staff felt the lack of closure prevented them from reflecting with the site on what had been learned and how best to move forward. We need to know more about the "exit" phase of the process and how to ensure a smooth transition.

We have many questions about the process. For example, how can we help schools understand the concept of shared leadership and put it into practice? We also wonder whether it makes a difference in how change proceeds if teachers know about first- and second-order change and the principal leadership responsibilities associated with student learning. We question how we can move teachers to deprivatizing their practice more quickly and encourage effective professional development practices.

The *Success in Sight* process is designed to help schools focus on school and teacher practices that influence student achievement. However, we need to continue to develop more tools for all of the practices, and particularly for some practices, such as safe and orderly environment. In addition, we need strategies for helping teams deepen their understanding about the actions needed to address the various school and teacher practices. A growing number of schools have taken the obvious first steps, but knowing what the next steps are and how to take them remains undefined in many cases. We simply don't have all of these answers yet.

Finally, we also would like to better understand how the method of service delivery affects the progress sites are able to make. We have delivered the *Success in Sight* process — or parts of it — by either: (1) convening a group of sites three or four times a year and having an external mentor meet monthly with the leadership team to provide follow-up support, or (2) meeting monthly with an individual school, with McREL staff serving in the mentor role. We have not investigated which method works best in which situations or if the two approaches produce different kinds of outcomes or produce outcomes at different rates.

TRAINING OTHERS TO IMPLEMENT *SUCCESS IN SIGHT*

Training others to use *Success in Sight* involves helping them understand how the process should unfold in practice. One way to do this is through publications. For example, McREL's 2005 *Noteworthy Perspectives* will present background information about *Success in Sight* and tell the story of how a school used the process. McREL staff members have written an article titled, *Turning Failure into Opportunity* (Galvin & Parsley, 2005), which documents the work of one South Dakota school. This article is available electronically on ASCD's web site. Other

articles are planned for next year. Training might also be provided through video or online courses or face-to-face sessions.

McREL staff are reviewing, refining, and classifying, by stage, the various tools that were used over the last three years. These will be placed in a database at www.mcrel.org for easy access by McREL facilitators in different sites and, eventually, others outside the organization. New tools will also be created. A facilitator's guide to the process and modules for each stage, with suggestions for appropriate tools, also will be produced and made available online. A training that helps others understand how to facilitate the process will be developed and used with intermediate service agency staff, state support team members, and district-sponsored school improvement or instructional coaches.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

No one would deny that children are the future, and few would argue with the idea that the way to secure the future is to educate children well. However, educating all children well is a challenge for an increasing number of schools. With its research-based approach to school improvement, *Success in Sight* offers a way for schools to meet that challenge. We will continue to refine *Success in Sight* — its process and content — and investigate how and why it works in which contexts. We expect to help others understand how to use the school improvement process to ensure that schools have the capacity to overcome challenges to educating children today as well as tomorrow.

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APPENDIX: DEVELOPMENT OF THE McREL APPROACH

The seeds for the McREL Approach were planted in the 1990s, as McREL worked with district and school staffs to help them implement standards-based education and fulfill its promise — high achievement for all students. These seeds were nourished in the late 1990s and in the first years of the 21st century by what McREL discovered through two meta-analyses of existing research about the effects of instructional strategies on student achievement (Marzano, 1998) and the effects of school and teacher practices and student characteristics on student achievement (Marzano, 2000).

As McREL deepened its organizational knowledge about which education practices have the greatest potential for a positive impact on student achievement, the foundation of the McREL Approach began to take shape. The framework was further informed by the results of a later meta-analysis on the effects of principal leadership on student achievement (see Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004) and by the lessons learned from working with schools in South Dakota and Kansas on a long-term basis. As a result, the McREL Approach reflects the organization's accumulated knowledge about the important tasks that schools must undertake if they are to reach the goal of bringing all students to proficiency in mathematics and reading by 2014 and the ways in which change agents can assist schools in accomplishing these tasks.

This section describes the research and best practices related to learning communities, school improvement, professional development, change models, and leadership on which the McREL Approach was built. It also presents the principles and school improvement model that are part of the foundation of the McREL Approach.

RESEARCH AND BEST PRACTICE BEHIND THE MCREL APPROACH

Over the years, as a Regional Educational Laboratory, McREL has worked intensively with schools and districts across the nation to help them implement standards-based education. Through those efforts, a great deal was learned about what high-performing schools had in common, but little was articulated about *how* schools make the journey from low-performing school to high-performing learning community. To develop this critical information, McREL designed a program of research and service as part of its Regional Educational Laboratory program to identify this procedural knowledge.

Early in 2001, McREL began its efforts to develop an initial strategy for working with low-performing schools and documenting the manner by which schools transform from low-performing to high-performing *learning communities*. The notion of "learning communities" is key. These two words encapsulate the recognition that high-performing schools differ from low-performing ones in more than just the achievement level of their students. High-performing schools are fundamentally different from low-performing ones — these schools are places of learning for *everyone*, from students to teachers to administrators.

With the development of high-performing learning communities as the goal, McREL based its initial school improvement framework on an integration of research and best practice related to learning communities, school improvement, professional development, and change processes.

Learning Communities

In the 1980s and 1990s, organizational theorists in the business world (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Senge, 1990) highlighted the importance of organizational learning for organizational development. As Hord (1997) noted, in the education realm, this concept of organizational learning translated into the notion of professional learning communities. As conversation in the business world focused on organizational learning, Rosenholtz (1989) and other educators (e.g., Fullan, 1991) began to focus attention on the need to provide opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively to improve student achievement.

Researchers (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Byrk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999) who studied professional learning communities found that "deprivatized" practice is the norm in a professional learning community, where teachers observe, mentor, and provide feedback to each other. Further, the focus of collaborative work and conversations is clearly on issues and problems of teaching and learning (Hord, 1997). Other researchers (Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Lee & Smith, 1996; Louis & Marks, 1998) found that such collaboration led to positive changes in student achievement and teacher practice.

In her extensive review of the research on professional learning communities, Hord (1997) notes that successful learning communities have the following characteristics:

- the collegial and facilitative participation of a principal who shares leadership — and thus, power and authority — through inviting staff input in decision making;

- a shared vision that is developed from an unswerving commitment on the part of staff to students' learning and consistently articulated and referenced for the staff's work;

- collective learning among staff and application of the learning to solutions that address students' needs;

- the visitation and review of each teacher's classroom behavior by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement; and

- physical conditions and human capacities that support such an operation (p. 4).

Although various researchers have used slightly different characteristics to describe a professional learning community, they all agree that a professional learning community provides an environment in which teachers can work collectively and collaboratively to examine instructional practice, improve their effectiveness, and increase student achievement.

In a study of the winners of the National Award for Model Professional Development conducted by WestEd (2000), researchers found that a culture of learning was key to the schools' success in improving student achievement. The study explains the central importance of a professional learning community and provides a description of how the eight schools included in

the study developed their professional learning communities. Six lessons about what these schools do to help teachers learn emerged from the study:

- Use clear, agreed-upon student achievement goals to focus and shape teacher learning.

- Provide an expanded array of professional development opportunities.

- Embed ongoing, informal learning into the school culture.

- Build a highly-collaborative school environment where working together to solve problems and learn from each other become cultural norms.

- Find the time to allow teacher learning to happen.

- Keep checking a broad range of student performance data.

Given the relationship between professional learning community and student achievement, an important goal for McREL's work with low-performing schools was to help them establish and sustain a professional learning community. Although there were some examples of successful professional learning communities at the time (Hord, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998), there was little specific knowledge of precisely how professional learning communities develop or operate (Hord, 1997). McREL's work with schools and districts in need of improvement has provided us with opportunities to add to this knowledge base.

School Improvement

It seems obvious that the way to improve student achievement is to effectively implement practices that are correlated with student achievement. To identify these practices, McREL conducted two meta-analyses, one on instructional strategies (Marzano, 1998) and the other on schooling practices (Marzano, 2000). The first of these meta-analyses identified nine categories of instructional strategies that are generally effective with all types of students, in all grade levels, and in all content areas. A brief explanation for each of these categories is provided in Exhibit A-1.

Exhibit A-1: Nine Categories of Instructional Strategies that Influence Student Achievement

Category	Explanation
Similarities & Differences	• Enhance students' understanding of and ability to use knowledge by engaging them in mental processes that involve identifying ways items are alike and different.
Summarizing & Note Taking	• Enhance students' ability to synthesize information and organize it in a way that captures the main ideas and supporting details.
Reinforcing Effort & Providing Recognition	• Enhance students' understanding of the relationship between effort and achievement by addressing students' attitudes and beliefs about learning. • Provide students rewards or praise for their accomplishments related to the attainment of a goal.

Homework & Practice	• Extend the learning opportunities for students to practice, review, and apply knowledge. • Enhance students' ability to reach the expected level of proficiency for a skill or process.
Nonlinguistic Representation	• Enhance students' ability to represent and elaborate on knowledge using mental images.
Cooperative Learning	• Provide students with opportunities to interact with each other in groups in ways that enhance their learning.
Setting Objectives & Providing Feedback	• Provide students a direction for learning and information regarding how well they are performing relative to a particular learning goal so that they can improve their performance.
Generating & Testing Hypotheses	• Enhance students' understanding of and ability to use knowledge by engaging them in mental processes that involve making and testing hypotheses.
Cues, Questions, & Advance Organizers	• Enhance students' ability to retrieve, use, and organize what they already know about a topic.

The second meta-analysis (Marzano, 2000) focused on schooling practices and analyzed research conducted over the last 30 years. This meta-analysis yielded three categories of variables associated with student achievement: school, teacher, and student. Key variables identified within each of these categories are presented in Exhibit A-2. These variables formed the core of our school improvement approach. That is, the work was designed to help schools develop the capacity to deal with these variables in ways that increase student achievement.

Exhibit A-2: Key Variables that Influence Student Achievement

Category	Variable	Explanation
• School	• Opportunity to learn	• Students are more likely to have opportunities to learn the required knowledge when a school has a well-articulated curriculum, has aligned curriculum with assessments, and monitors the extent to which teachers teach the articulated curriculum.
	• Time	• Refers to the amount of time allocated for instruction. The goal is to have as much time as possible for instruction and minimize the instructional time lost to absenteeism, tardiness, and unnecessary extracurricular activities.
	• Monitoring	• Refers to the articulation of academic goals at the school level and the monitoring of progress toward those goals. This requires that student achievement data are available and used to make decisions about instruction.
	• Pressure to achieve	• Communication of a strong message that academic achievement is a primary goal of the school. There are high expectations for all students to achieve and student achievement is celebrated.
	• Parental involvement	• Refers to the extent to which parents are involved in and supportive of policy and curricular decisions and have access to administrators and teachers through effective two-way communication.
	• Climate	• Refers to the extent to which a school creates an atmosphere that students perceive as orderly and supportive. This type of climate has clearly articulated and enforced rules and procedures, norms of civility, and positive interactions among staff and students.
	• Leadership	• Refers to the extent to which the school has strong administrative leadership relative to the goal of academic achievement. In effective schools, leadership roles are well-articulated and the school leader provides information and facilitates group decision making.
	• Cooperation	• Refers to the extent to which staff members support one another by sharing resources, ideas, and solutions to common problems. Indicators of cooperation are the frequency and quality of formal and informal meetings, informal contacts among staff, high degree of agreement on school policies, use of consensus for critical decisions, and a focus on staff cooperation as a goal.

Category	Variable	Explanation
• Teacher	• Instruction	• Teachers in effective schools know about and use research-based instructional strategies. Nine categories of instructional strategies were identified by Marzano (1998): identifying similarities and differences; summarizing and note taking; reinforcing effort and providing recognition, homework and practice; nonlinguistic representation; cooperative learning; setting goals and providing feedback; generating and testing hypotheses; and activating prior knowledge (cues, questions, advance organizers).
	• Curriculum design	• This variable addresses the order and pacing of content and instructional activities within and between lessons and units.
	• Classroom management	• Refers to teaching behaviors and teacher-designed activities that are designed to minimize disruptions or distractions to learning and maximize the effectiveness of interactions between teachers and students and among students. This involves implementing procedures and rules for routine and non-routine activities in the classroom.
• Student	• Home atmosphere	• Refers to the amount of support in the home for learning (e.g., reading to children, helping children with homework, encouraging students to go to college, taking children to the library or cultural events).
	• Aptitude and prior knowledge	• Refers to efforts to increase students' general and background knowledge and view academic intelligence as a function of learned intelligence rather than innate skills.
	• Interest	• Refers to efforts to identify and tap into students' interests and to provide them with opportunities to have some control over how topics are addressed.

The meta-analyses were not the only influence on our view of school improvement. Our approach also grew out of our knowledge of school improvement processes and our experience providing technical assistance to schools engaged in school improvement — those receiving Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration funding in the late 1990s as well as others. Lessons from a study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (Berman, 2001) were similar to those we had learned. Specifically, the study conducted by Berman highlighted the concept of "readiness for reform" and the necessity to account for the school's context when providing assistance. Similarly, we recognized the need to provide on-site support to low-performing schools, the value of bringing schools together to learn from one another, the role that districts play in supporting improvement at the school level, and the considerable amount of time it takes for low-performing schools to improve (McREL, 2000a).

Professional Development

When we began our improvement work with schools and districts in 2002, we were guided by a vision of professional development that was based on the principles of professional development created by the U.S. Department of Education (1995) in conjunction with staff developers, teacher education researchers, members of professional organizations, and practitioners. These principles are presented in Exhibit A-3.

Exhibit A-3: Principles of Professional Development Used in the National Awards Program for Model Professional Development

• Principle 1	• Focuses on teachers as central to student learning yet includes all other members of the school community.
• Principle 2	• Focuses on individual, collegial, and organizational improvement.
• Principle 3	• Respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers, principals, and others in the school community.
• Principle 4	• Reflects best available research and practice in teaching, learning, and leadership.
• Principle 5	• Enables teachers to develop further expertise in subject content, teaching strategies, use of technologies and other essential elements in teaching to high standards.
• Principle 6	• Promotes continuous inquiry and improvement embedded in the daily life of schools.
• Principle 7	• Is planned collaboratively by those who will participate in and facilitate that development.
• Principle 8	• Requires substantial time and other resources.
• Principle 9	• Is driven by a coherent long-term plan.
• Principle 10	• Is evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning, and this assessment guides subsequent professional development efforts.

Note: From *Mission and Principles of Professional Development*, by the U. S. Department of Education Professional Development Team, 1995. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

The principles created by the U.S. Department of Education are well-aligned with change process literature and other research on the characteristics of effective programs. For example, Youngs (1999) states that schools must design professional development activities that

- provide teachers with meaningful opportunities to actively engage with new disciplinary ideas and acquire new instructional strategies,

- involve collaboration with colleagues and opportunities to engage in reflective inquiry,

- take individual teachers' backgrounds into consideration as well as the contexts in which they work, [and]

- provide teachers with sufficient time and follow-up support, including regular feedback from accomplished practitioners. (pp. 3–4)

Such activities increase teachers' knowledge and skills, strengthen the school's professional community, and increase the degree to which the school's programs are focused, coherent, and sustained over time (Youngs, 1999). As a result, student achievement is likely to increase.

Based on our experience with the National Awards Program for Model Professional Development, we understood the relationship between professional development and increases in student achievement at the very outset of our field work. We also understood how little most schools know about high-quality professional development and how to align professional development with school improvement goals. As a result, another goal of the work with low-performing schools was to increase their knowledge and use of effective professional development.

Change Theory

The theory of change incorporated in the McREL Approach was informed by the literature on how change occurs in schools and the views of various change theorists about the nature of change. The initial framework for working with low-performing schools drew from these various perspectives on change to help schools make changes related to their core functions — teaching and learning.

In their review of research and practice related to school change, Sashkin and Egermeier (1993) identified four strategies for bringing about change in schools: (1) fix the parts, (2) fix the people, (3) fix the school, and (4) fix the system. The "fix the parts" strategy focuses on the transfer of innovations, such as new curriculum materials, teaching practices, or leadership practices, from the developer to school staff members. The "fix the people" approach centers on providing training that helps teachers and administrators acquire the knowledge and skills they need to use new practices. The goal of the "fix the school" strategy, which draws from the field of organizational development, is to help schools develop the capacity to solve their own problems. Use of data figures prominently in this approach, as do other processes that promote good quality of work life, sharing of information, and good organizational performance. The "fix the system" approach, known as systemic reform, acknowledges that improving student achievement for all students "involves changes in roles, rules, and relationships" (Sashkin & Egermeier, p. 14) at all levels of the education system. These changes include decentralizing decision-making and redefining accountability in a way that takes into consideration the needs of various stakeholders (e.g., state education agency, school board, teachers, and parents).

Each of these strategies reflects one or more of three perspectives on how and why schools change (see sidebar) and each can be successful under certain circumstances. Still, the most effective

> **Perspectives on How and Why Schools Change**
>
> **Rational Scientific:** Assumes that people accept and use information that has been scientifically shown to result in educational improvement. Dominant from late 1950s to 1970s.
>
> **Political:** Assumes that schools change as a result of external directives in the form of laws and mandates for implementing reforms or incentives for achieving desired outcomes. A top-down perspective dominant during the 1980s.
>
> **Cultural:** Assumes that schools change through the actions of leaders to transform the culture, changing meanings and values within the organization. Dominant in the 1990s.

way to achieve widespread success with school reform is to combine the strategies to create a truly systemic approach.

The systemic change model — the "big picture" view of change — is characterized by several features: (1) including stakeholders, (2) designing for the ideal system, (3) understanding the relationships among the parts of the system, with the system, and with the system and other systems, and (4) creating a viable system. Regardless of the focus of the innovation, those involved in the change must ensure that they maintain the viability of the system as a whole. Authors associated with the systemic change model include Banathy (1988) and Reigeluth and Garfinkle (1994).

In 2002, our approach to assisting low-performing schools reflected a systemic view of change that recognized that, on their journey to becoming high performing, schools must undergo different kinds of changes (McREL, 2000b). Some of these changes will involve minor adjustments designed to improve the efficiency of the system, which are referred to as incremental or continuous changes (Nadler & Tushman, 1995). Other changes will be dramatic departures from past practices and will transform the system, which are called fundamental (Bechard & Pritchard, 1992), deep (Quinn, 1996), or discontinuous (Nadler & Tushman, 1995) changes. These distinctions are important because different approaches are needed to manage the two types of change. Many of the changes that low-performing schools need to make to improve student achievement are fundamental changes and pose significant challenges for schools (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). McREL staff understood that the work with low-performing schools would involve helping schools respond to these challenges by surfacing and confronting deeply held beliefs, questioning long-held values, considering other perspectives, and learning new ways of approaching problems and interacting with their environments (McREL, 2000b).

Leadership

For a number of years prior to 2002, McREL studied the literature on leadership inside and outside of the field of education. Given the nature of changes facing schools at the dawn of the 21st century, McREL developed a view of leadership for fundamental change (McREL, 2000b) to guide its work with schools and districts. This view reflected current thinking about leadership in the business and education realms. The following guidelines were incorporated into the framework for working with low-performing schools:

- Recognize that leadership is not the same as management — leaders play an important role in creating a shared vision for change and shouldn't neglect that role by becoming too focused on managing day-to-day problems.

- Give up the notion of a "hero-leader" — a view of leadership that encourages people to look to one person in a position of authority to make important decisions is too narrow to sustain improvement efforts for the long run. Schools should abandon the search for the one person who will save the day.

- Develop broad-based leadership — schools should build the capacity of many to engage in leading reform. Leadership can be exercised in a number of ways (e.g., curriculum writing teams, school improvement teams, grade-level teams). Schools should develop formal and informal leaders at all levels.

- Encourage and nurture individual initiative — recognize that anyone in the school can serve as a change agent and cause the school to examine its assumptions and practices, spurring it to learn and accomplish its goals.

- Build a learning organization — consider every person and every situation a resource for learning. Create an environment in which people can explore ideas and options. Provide opportunities for people to work together to examine practices and solve problems.

- Take a "balcony view" — step back from the action and become an objective observer of what is occurring in the "field of action." This allows leaders to monitor and adjust progress toward the vision (McREL, 2000b, pp. 8-15).

THE INITIAL MCREL APPROACH FRAMEWORK

McREL drew upon the research and best practices described in the literature, as well as from our own experience in the field, to create a framework for assisting low-performing schools. The following principles served as the foundation for the framework:

1. **Based on Research**

   Practices that have been systematically investigated and linked to improved student learning are used.

2. **Standards-Based Education**

   Work is designed to support a system that is driven by clearly articulated and measurable learning targets that apply to all students.

3. **Data-Driven Decision Making**

   Information is purposefully gathered and used to make decisions about actions needed to improve student learning.

4. **Based on Theories of Change**

   A coherent, articulated theory of change that considers the role of time, stages of change, and levels of change underlies all school improvement work.

5. **Based on a Model**

   A coherent framework of inter-related school improvement elements guides the work.

6. **Focused on Learning Communities**

   Work is designed to promote professional growth through collegiality and collaboration.

7. **Assumes a Positive View of People**

   Work is designed based on the belief that people have the ability and will to learn what is necessary to improve student performance.

8. **Focused on Continuous Improvement**

   Actions are driven by the pursuit of excellence and guided by reflective thinking.

9. **Systemic**

   All elements of the educational system are considered in relation to the whole and to each other.

10. **Addresses Multiple Levels**

    Work is designed to address the capacity, needs, and interactions of national, state, and local levels of the educational system.

School Improvement Model

One of the initial goals of McREL's work with low-performing schools was to help school staff learn how to develop a high-quality school improvement plan that could guide their improvement efforts. Exhibit A-4 shows the school improvement process presented to schools when we worked with them in 2002.

Exhibit A-4: School Improvement Process
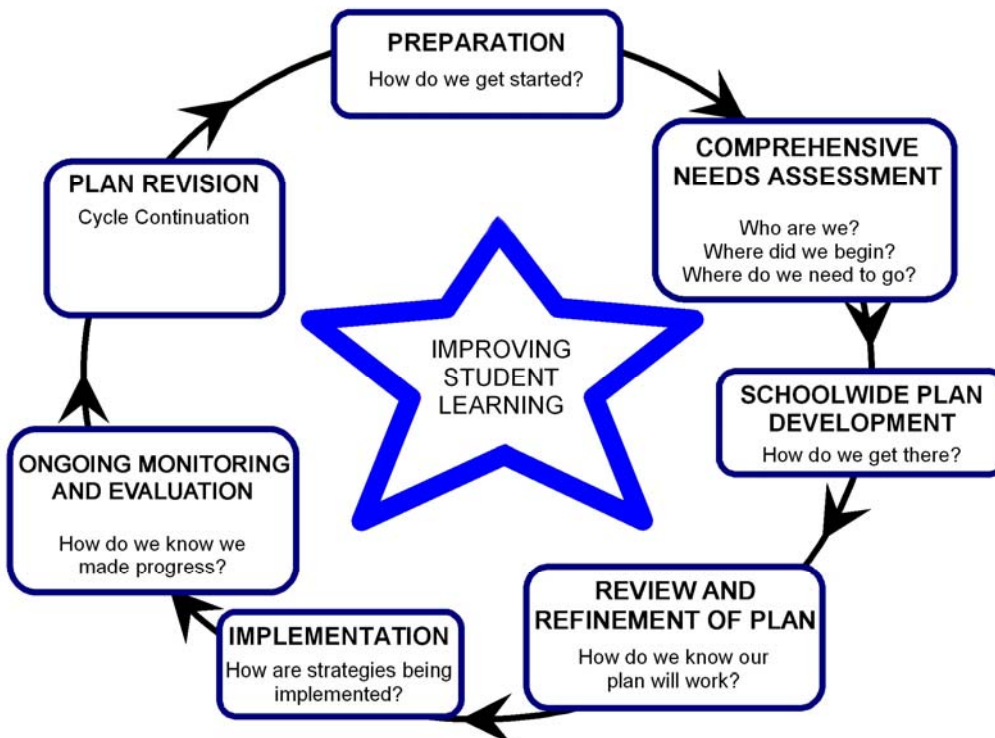
The process includes seven steps: (1) preparation, (2) comprehensive needs assessment, (3) school-wide plan development, (4) review and refinement of the plan, (5) implementation, (6) ongoing program development, and (7) plan revision. Each step is further defined by action steps. The model emphasizes the cyclical nature of the process and the use of data for making decisions about goals, selecting strategies, and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of strategies (see Exhibit A-5).

Exhibit A-5: School Improvement Process Action Steps

Step	Actions
Preparation	• Set the context for school improvement • Establish planning team • Design the planning process and timelines • Identify core educational values and/or beliefs • Align mission and vision
Comprehensive Needs Assessment	• Collect, disaggregate, analyze, and interpret multiple types of data (i.e., outcome, demographic, program, perception) • Generate a school profile, noting strengths and weaknesses • Examine data for alignment with values and beliefs
School-wide Plan Development	• Develop measurable goals aligned to Annual Yearly Progress • Develop strategies to improve student achievement • Create professional development plan aligned with improvement goals • Reallocate resources to support implementation of improvement goals
Review and Refinement of Plan	• Internal and external school-wide plan review • Recommendations for finalizing school-wide plan • Whole-staff discussion and commitment to support the plan
Implementation	• Implement improvement strategies • Document technical assistance
Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation	• Use assessment data to determine progress for individual students and the school as a whole • Share results with parents • Develop plan to assure timely assistance for students not making progress

	• Adjust or revise improvement strategies as needed • Evaluate progress toward meeting improvement goals • Document technical assistance
Plan Revision	• Review evaluation results and begin the improvement cycle anew

As we further refined our school improvement process, these steps evolved into the original seven stages (later pared to six stages) of the McREL Approach (see Exhibit A-7). "Preparation" became Stages 1 and 2: Assess Readiness for Improvement and Provide an Overview of Our Process. "Comprehensive Needs Assessment" became Stage 3: Assess Strengths/Weaknesses/Needs. "Schoolwide Plan Development" and "Review and Refinement of Plan" became Stage 4: Create a Tailored Intervention/Strategy. The implementation step is mirrored in Stage 5: Implement the Plan. "Ongoing Program Development" became Stage 6: Ongoing Monitoring/Assessment, and "Plan Revision" evolved into Stage 7: Hand Off and Exit.

Theory of Action

The theory of action embedded in the initial framework reflects a commitment to building the capacity for continuous improvement among school staff. In other words, as a result of working with McREL, schools will eventually have structures, processes, and attitudes in place that help it solve problems and continuously improve on its own in the future.

The theory of action recognizes that the principal plays an important role in school improvement but, given the nature of the changes involved, suggests 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 representative school leadership teams to increase their capacity to lead school improvement.

Accordingly, the theory of action highlights the role of the leadership team in establishing a professional learning community and in leading school improvement efforts. The former involves attending to organizational development — creating a shared vision, developing processes for making decisions and solving problems, learning skills for working as a team, increasing communication within the school, designing and implementing professional development aligned with improvement goals, gathering and using feedback about how well the school is functioning, and acting on feedback to improve the school. The latter involves using data to determine improvement goals, identify strategies for improvement, and implement, monitor, and evaluate improvement strategies. These aspects of the team's leadership role are included under school leadership team capacity in Exhibit A-5.

McREL's theory of action maintains that school improvement efforts should be focused 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 A-5. The theory of action is built on the premise that leadership teams 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 A-6, 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). These change agents must be prepared to assume a variety of roles, including catalyst, content expert/solution giver, process helper, and resource linker (Havelock & Zlotolow (1995). In the catalyst role, the change agent prods the system to

Exhibit A-6. Representation of Theory of Action
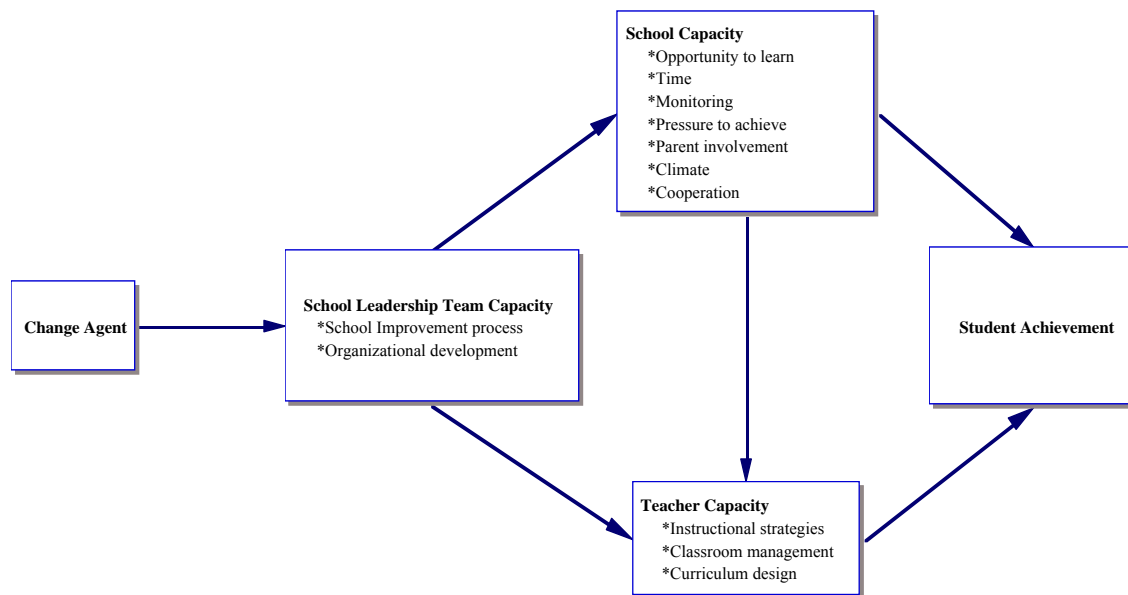
help it overcome the inertia that keeps it from making necessary changes. The solution giver, or content expert, serves as a "surveyor of the landscape," making others aware of new ideas and stirring their interest in change. The process helper attends to all aspects of the change process — including evaluation — and focuses on helping others become problem solvers. The resource linker helps leadership teams find and make the best use of a variety of resources.

Outcomes

As shown in the theory of action, the initial framework focused on developing leadership capacity, school capacity, and teacher capacity. Specific outcomes of the work were identified related to each of these. The list of outcomes that follows includes those that McREL thought most important at the time; it is not an exhaustive list. The outcomes reflect an emphasis on developing professional learning community and learning how to lead school improvement efforts.

As a result of participating in school improvement work with McREL, school leadership team members will:

- develop and implement a school improvement plan;

- use a variety of data to (1) set goals for improvement, (2) select and evaluate improvement strategies, (3) select and evaluate professional development activities, (4) adjust instruction to meet students' needs;

- align curriculum, instruction, and assessment to state content standards;

- use research-based instructional strategies;

- design standards-based units and assessments;

- develop a standards-based grading and reporting system;

- work collaboratively as a staff to accomplish goals;

- involve parents in ways that support student learning; and

- access and use print, electronic, and human resources on the local, state, regional, and national levels to support school improvement.

Definition of the Intervention

McREL staff defined seven stages to describe the intervention process. The early stages focus on building relationships, learning about the context of the site, and deciding how the improvement effort will be organized. Later stages involve assisting the site with development, implementation, and evaluation of the improvement plan and planning for sustainability. The stages of the McREL Approach, as initially defined, are described in Exhibit A-7.

Exhibit A-7: Description of Stages of McREL Approach

Stage	Description
1. Assess Readiness for Improvement	McREL staff gather information about • The facts and dynamics that led to the request for assistance • The nature and extent of current initiatives • Who is leading the change effort • The level of commitment to change of leaders and other staff • The resources available to support change
2. Provide an Overview of Our Process	McREL staff explain • The overall intervention process • Stages of the McREL Approach • The collaborative nature of the partnership • The expectations and outcomes and roles and responsibilities of all involved

3. Assess Strengths/ Weaknesses/Needs	McREL staff collect information about • Demographics of the site • Student performance • Status of site in relation to organizational development and use of school and teacher practices
4. Create a Tailored Intervention/Strategy	McREL staff and site members create a tailored plan for improvement. This includes • Establishing goals for the work • Establishing progress and outcome measures • Identifying focus of the work (e.g., changes in practice) • Identifying how goals will be accomplished (e.g., frequency of meetings, study groups) • Identifying how data will be collected, analyzed, reported, and used to make adjustments to the plan
5. Implement the Plan	McREL staff assist school leadership team members in putting the plan into action. McREL staff • Provide professional development related to leadership, instruction, curriculum, and other issues related to the school and teacher factors associated with student achievement • Facilitate team meetings School leadership team members • Practice applying leadership skills • Learn how to function as a team • Complete agreed-upon actions • Take steps to establish professional learning community
6. Ongoing Monitoring/ Assessment	McREL staff assist leadership team members • Carry out the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes outlined in the improvement plan • Determine whether feedback is being used effectively for system improvement • Determine whether the monitoring and evaluation system needs to be refined
7. Hand Off and Exit	McREL staff help leadership team members • Focus on the elements of sustainability • Assess the extent to which the team has addressed elements of sustainability School leadership team members • Develop a plan for ensuring appropriate structures and processes are in place to sustain improvement efforts

SUMMARY: DEVELOPMENT OF THE MCREL APPROACH

Based on McREL's years of research and professional wisdom, the initial McREL Approach framework laid out a systemic approach to change that was based on a set of design principles and a coherent, articulated theory of change. By understanding the distinction between two different types of change — incremental and fundamental — schools begin to grasp the complexity of the change process and learn ways to manage both types. However, to avoid

overwhelming schools with the enormity of the school improvement tasks ahead, McREL initially broke the McREL Approach down into seven manageable stages: assess readiness for improvement; provide an overview of our process; assess strengths/weaknesses/needs; create a tailored intervention strategy; implement the plan; provide ongoing monitoring/assessment; and hand off and exit.

The principles that guided the initial development of the McREL Approach are of little use without a plan to bring them to fruition. As a result, the initial McREL Approach included a theory of action, which assumes that internal or external change agents can assist school leadership teams in acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to lead school improvement and organizational development efforts. In the process, the team learns how to initiate and sustain changes in those school- and teacher-level practices that are most likely to have a positive impact on student achievement.