

# NEWSLETTER

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## DESIGNING EFFECTIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

**A**cross the country, educators in schools that have not met their targets for improved student learning are considering next steps. As a first step, a school improvement plan that is grounded in data and based on a comprehensive needs assessment can provide a framework for effecting change for a school's programming, student support systems, and climate.

The best school improvement plans are not rigid prescriptions for day-to-day action, but rather are guides for ongoing improvement in critical areas. An effective plan sets forth action steps, establishes timelines, and identifies outcome measures to monitor and evaluate success. If a plan is to become a key resource and guide for school improvement, then it must be crafted and owned by all of the stakeholders—teachers, support staff, school leaders, students, families, district officials, community members, and business organizations.

As they begin this effort, stakeholders can benefit from using a development process that acknowledges and builds on the school's strengths and establishes a school vision and mission to drive implementation. Most important, the plan should specify the desired outcomes and establish measures to assess progress. In considering what these outcomes and measures might include, the planning team may want to benchmark its improvement work to the characteristics of high-achieving schools that are correlated with improved student engagement and achievement.

Research has identified a set of elements that highly effective schools have in common (Table 1). A school improvement plan can incorporate each of these elements to provide a blueprint for more effective teaching and higher student achievement. This newsletter describes six quality indicators of high-achieving schools and discusses related strategies that may be incorporated into a comprehensive plan for schoolwide improvement initiatives. (Note: Some of the strategies discussed in this newsletter have been featured in other publications from The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, and a topical resource guide has been provided for readers who are seeking more in-depth information.)

**Table 1. Six Quality Indicators of High-Achieving Schools**

Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum is aligned with state standards and assessments in all subject areas.</li> <li>• Curriculum is articulated clearly across all grade levels and subject areas, and at key transition points to close gaps and eliminate duplication.</li> <li>• Curriculum provides flexibility to meet the needs of all students, including special education, gifted and talented, culturally and linguistically diverse, and economically disadvantaged students.</li> <li>• A process is in place for monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the curriculum.</li> <li>• Textbooks and other materials are sufficient for use in delivering curriculum in all content areas.</li> </ul>
Effective Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are evaluated (both formally and informally) and provided with regular feedback.</li> <li>• Teachers are provided with professional development that is relevant to their needs, based in classroom practice, and reinforced through ongoing support.</li> <li>• Instruction is based on curriculum aligned to state standards, and frequent benchmark assessments are used to monitor student performance.</li> <li>• Activities and assignments (including homework) are engaging, relevant to the content, and reinforce or extend the objective of each lesson.</li> <li>• Additional assistance is provided for low-performing students in the classroom and/or through out-of-classroom or afterschool programs.</li> </ul>
Use of Formative Assessment and Student Assessment Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of student learning is frequent and aligned with state standards and district curriculum.</li> <li>• A comprehensive school-level accountability and data management system is in place.</li> <li>• Student progress data are reported frequently and regularly to students and parents.</li> <li>• Teachers make instructional decisions based on student performance data.</li> </ul>
Positive School Climate Focused on Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High expectations for academic achievement for all students are evident throughout the school environment.</li> <li>• The school environment is driven by a clear plan for school safety and codes of conduct for staff and students.</li> <li>• Discipline plans and procedures reflect equity and a respect for diversity in all areas.</li> <li>• The physical environment is clean and orderly.</li> <li>• Support is provided for students at key transition points—PK through kindergarten, elementary through middle school, and middle school through high school.</li> </ul>
Effective School Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A shared vision and mission are evident throughout the school.</li> <li>• Decision making that is focused on the school vision and mission is shared with teachers, staff, and the community.</li> <li>• The principal ensures an equitable, respectful, and supportive environment that is focused on promoting high achievement expectations for all students.</li> </ul>
Family and Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families are invited to participate in school activities and programs.</li> <li>• Families are informed of opportunities that may help students who struggle in school.</li> <li>• Families and community members are invited and encouraged to participate in school improvement efforts.</li> <li>• School personnel actively seek out community participation in school activities and planning.</li> </ul>

# Quality Indicators and Improvement Strategies

## QUALITY INDICATOR 1: *Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum*

A coherent, articulated, and challenging curriculum is the foundation for effective instruction and learning. A school improvement plan must focus on ensuring that the curriculum reflects high standards for learning.

Education literature generally acknowledges three aspects of curriculum. They are:

- Written curriculum consisting of standards, learning objectives and outcomes, textbooks and supporting materials
- Taught curriculum consisting of the topics, concepts, and skills actually addressed in the classroom
- Tested curriculum consisting of formative and summative assessment

In high-performing schools and districts, the curriculum documents, instructional materials and resources, and all curriculum-related instructional programs support one another.

Schools can take steps to ensure congruence between the written, taught, and tested curriculum. In many cases these processes are enhanced with the support and participation of district staff and resources. Typically, a committee of educators will convene to examine the written and tested curriculum and make decisions or recommendations about materials, instruction, and the effective use of time. One strategy is to study content standards and carefully “unpack,” or break down, the precise content knowledge, skill, and application of each standard. Once a common understanding of the standard has been reached, educators can set about designing lesson and unit plans, identifying appropriate material, and selecting assessments.

Liebling (1997) identifies the following general approaches to examining curriculum alignment:

- Begin with a review of assessment results. Educators identify areas of student weakness and then scrutinize the written materials with the aim

of bolstering the curriculum to shore up student achievement in the identified areas.

- Begin with clearly articulated outcomes for each grade and subject area, and then select or develop an assessment to measure student learning.

Both approaches rely on assessment data to monitor the alignment of instructional materials and instructional delivery.

The process of reviewing and evaluating the curriculum can provide data for making informed decisions. The data can be used to identify content areas where updated, additional, or alternative materials are needed. Classroom teachers require appropriate and sufficient materials to meet the needs of all students including special education, gifted and talented, culturally and linguistically diverse, and economically disadvantaged learners. Committees may decide to adopt new materials, supplement old materials, or devote more instructional time to certain concepts.

This process of examination also can serve as an impetus for addressing the rigor of student expectations and outcomes. When working to align the written, taught, and tested curriculum, allow for sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of individual learners and subgroups. Establishing a process for regularly monitoring and evaluating the curriculum for alignment can be a crucial step in school improvement.

## QUALITY INDICATOR 2: *Effective Instruction*

Improving classroom practice can improve student learning (Marzano, 2003; Weglinsky, 2000). A school improvement plan can target areas of instruction for improvement.

Research has shown that teachers have greater influence on student achievement than any other school-based factor (Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997; Nye, Konstantopolous, & Hedges, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002). Research also shows that students who are assigned to the most effective teachers make greater educational gains than do students with less effective teachers (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Through a combination of

instructional design, professional development, and support for teachers at all stages of their professional lives, schools can make significant strides in achieving higher educational outcomes for all students.

Schools are required to ensure that all educators meet the criteria to be designated “highly qualified.” Effective schools also ensure that the strongest instructors are assigned to the most critical areas of student need. Effective teachers are successful in engaging and challenging learners to advance their achievement.

Effective teachers also provide students with a variety of engaging and relevant learning activities that reinforce or extend learning objectives. Because there is no single instructional strategy that is guaranteed to improve achievement for every learner, teachers need a variety of instructional strategies for high-performing, grade-level, and struggling students. Studies have identified effective instructional strategies by examining classroom instruction and student performance on assessments (Marzano, 2003). Practices such as differentiated instruction and accommodating a range of learning styles can provide teachers with an array of tools and practices to reach students.

Schools can take steps to ensure that effective instructional strategies are employed in classrooms through formal and informal teacher evaluation combined with regular feedback. Informal evaluations may take the form of classroom observations conducted by an instructional leader with follow-up conversations about the successes and challenges observed. The teacher and the observer can identify actions to improve instructional delivery. Aspects of effective instructional practice also may be incorporated into formal evaluations if agreed upon by all parties.

Successful schools provide instructional staff with professional development that is aligned to improvement goals and addresses teacher needs. Research has identified characteristics of high-quality and effective professional development (Steiner, 2004). For example, professional development formats in which teachers collaborate and examine student work, and that occur over an extended period of time

(e.g., coaching, professional learning communities, and study groups) are more likely to result in improved teaching skills and practice (Steiner, 2004). Peer coaching and collaborative planning are job-embedded professional development strategies that provide ongoing support for effective instruction. Another effective professional development strategy engages classroom teachers with highly trained specialists (e.g., literacy specialists, special educators, and subject-area experts) to coordinate services and develop insight on how best to serve students.

Just as effective instructional methods are key for improving academic outcomes, so too is the content of instruction. In the book *What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action*, author Robert Marzano addresses the significance of alignment between the intended curriculum (required content defined by the state, district, or school) and the implemented curriculum (content introduced in the classroom). He says that potential discrepancies between the intended and implemented curriculum result in missed “opportunities to learn” required content (Marzano, p. 23). Some researchers point to this instructional gap as an explanation for low student achievement on standardized assessments.

Schools can assess the extent to which the curriculum they have adopted is truly an implemented or taught curriculum. For example, a review of unit or lesson plans, examples of student work, teacher surveys, and data from walk-throughs can inform educators about the implemented curriculum and whether there are gaps or overlaps in the content of instruction.

### **QUALITY INDICATOR 3: *Use of Formative Assessment and Student Assessment Data***

Schools and districts have become data-rich environments. For example, schools and districts now have assessment scores for all students in Grades 3–8 in reading and mathematics and, more recently, scores on science assessments. In addition to these annual summative assessment data, educators need frequent, formative assessment data and other data to report on student progress and make instructional decisions throughout the year.

# Topical Resource Guide to Quality Indicators and Center Publications

## QUALITY INDICATOR 1: *Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum*

**Are High Schools Failing Their Students? Strengthening Academic Rigor in High School Curriculum** (also available in PDF format) The October 2006 newsletter explores the issue of academic rigor and highlights current efforts to challenge and support high school students.

**Program Evaluation for the Practitioner: Using Evaluation as a School Improvement Strategy** (also available in PDF format) The June 2006 newsletter explains how schools can use program evaluation strategies to gather and analyze data and make informed decisions that contribute to continuous improvement.

**The Hidden Costs of Curriculum Narrowing** (August 2006) In this issue brief, author Craig Jerald discusses the costs involved when schools seek to improve student performance by increasing the time they spend on reading and mathematics while reducing time on other subjects.

**'Teach to the Test'? Just Say No** (July 2006) In this issue brief, author Craig Jerald discusses the challenge that teachers face when trying to produce good instructional practice and good test scores. Problems with "teaching to the test" are presented.

## QUALITY INDICATOR 2: *Effective Instruction*

**Road Map for Mathematics Achievement for All Students** (also available in PDF format) What can we learn from the National Mathematics Panel Report that can help to improve mathematics achievement among American students? (2009)

**A Look at Differentiating Instruction: Tips for Teachers** (also available in PDF format) The February 2009 newsletter offers tips for teachers on differentiating instruction.

**Response to Intervention: Possibilities for Service Delivery** (also available in PDF format) The June 2008 newsletter takes a look at the challenges and possibilities of implementing a Response to Intervention model at the secondary level.

**Stuck in the Middle: Strategies to Engage Middle-Level Learners** (also available in PDF format) The May 2008 newsletter examines strategies to keep middle school students focused and engaged in the classroom.

**It Pays to Compare! Using Comparison to Help Build Students' Flexibility in Mathematics** (also available in PDF format) The April 2008 newsletter examines the use of comparison as a means of introducing multiple strategies for problem solving in mathematics and encouraging the development of flexible knowledge in algebra.

**Getting to "Got It!" Helping Mathematics Students Reach Deep Understanding** (also available in PDF format) The March 2008 newsletter discusses a recent practice guide titled *Organizing Instruction and Study to Improve Student Learning* that aims to supplement and inform teachers' instincts and experiences by identifying research-based instructional strategies that teachers of all content areas can use to improve student learning.

**Attracting and Developing High-Quality Teachers** (also available in PDF format) The May 2007 newsletter highlights several strategies that may be useful in attracting and developing high-quality teachers.

**Using Positive Student Engagement to Increase Student Achievement** (also available in PDF format) The April 2007 newsletter describes how student engagement impacts learning and outlines ways in which teachers and school administrators can foster student engagement.

**Maximizing the Impact of Teacher Collaboration** (also available in PDF format) The March 2007 newsletter addresses teacher collaboration issues by posing five questions that teachers can use to keep their collaboration on track so that it contributes to the growth of a professional learning community in their school.

**A Teacher's Guide to Differentiating Instruction** (also available in PDF format) The January 2007 newsletter examines the characteristics of differentiation and offers suggestions for how teachers can use it to improve student achievement.

**Redefining Professional Development: Schools Can Become True Learning Communities for Teachers** (also available in PDF format) The February 2006 newsletter examines the characteristics of high-quality professional development and offers some suggestions for improving its impact and effectiveness.

**Things to Remember During the Teacher Hiring Season** (also available in PDF format) The May 2005 newsletter offers research-based advice and resources designed to help schools and districts find, employ, and place effective and qualified teachers.

**Getting and Keeping Teacher Quality Where it Counts** In the March 2005 newsletter, we summarize the findings of the National Partnership's inaugural report, *Qualified Teachers for At-Risk Schools: A National Imperative*, which highlights both pressing concerns and some promising solutions related to teacher quality.

**Writing Next:** What does research indicate concerning specific teaching techniques that will help adolescent students develop necessary writing skills? (2007)

**The Teacher Support Program:** How can we build upon the research concerning supporting special education teachers in the field to increase retention, relieve stress, and advance the profession? (2007)

**Gifted and Talented Students at Risk for Underachievement** (August 2008) Educators and policymakers can address gifted underachievement through changes in classroom and systemwide practices. This issue brief summarizes the issues underlying promising practices for supporting the gifted and talented. It also offers a series of questions to ask when planning schoolwide improvement efforts that address the needs of gifted and talented students—especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and low socioeconomic status (SES) families—who are at risk for underachievement.

**Building Collective Efficacy: How Leaders Inspire Teachers to Achieve** (October 2007) In this issue brief, authors Dana Brinson and Lucy Steiner take a look at how leaders can engage staff to build "collective efficacy," a perception of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on student learning.

**Love and Math** (March 2006) In this issue brief, author Craig Jerald examines the impact of a teacher's own mathematical knowledge on student learning.

### QUALITY INDICATOR 3: *Use of Formative Assessment and Student Assessment Data*

**Early Warning Systems That Support Students at Risk of Dropping Out of High School** (also available in PDF format) Looking at factors predicting graduation, including course failure, grade point average, and absences, what other factors can influence graduation for at-risk students? (2008)

**Using Classroom Assessment to Improve Teaching** (also available in PDF format) The December 2006 newsletter explains why ongoing, high-quality classroom assessments are so important and provides some suggestions for how they can be developed and used.

**Practices That Support Data Use in Urban High Schools:** What factors have had an impact on the use of student performance data in low-performing urban high schools? (2006)

**Using Data: *The Math's Not the Hard Part*** (September 2006) In this issue brief, author Craig Jerald highlights research collected in the July 2005 special issue of the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* to argue for collecting and using data to increase student achievement.

#### QUALITY INDICATOR 4: *Positive School Climate Focused on Achievement*

**Developing a Positive School Climate** (also available in PDF format) The April 2009 newsletter examines the research base behind school climate and what school administrators can do to create a positive school climate that enhances the learning environment and improves perceptions among students, staff, parents, and community members.

**Improving Teacher Retention With Supportive Workplace Conditions** (also available in PDF format) The June 2007 newsletter highlights the importance of supportive working conditions. Factors such as time, leadership, professional development, access to resources, and teacher empowerment all exert a significant influence on the degree of satisfaction teachers feel in their jobs.

**Using Positive Student Engagement to Increase Student Achievement** (also available in PDF format) The April 2007 newsletter describes how student engagement impacts learning and outlines ways in which teachers and school administrators can foster student engagement.

**The Teacher Support Program:** How can we build upon the research concerning supporting special education teachers in the field to increase retention, relieve stress, and advance the profession? (2007)

**School Culture: "The Hidden Curriculum"** (December 2006) In this issue brief, Craig Jerald discusses the impact of organizational culture on student achievement.

**Gifted and Talented Students at Risk for Underachievement** (August 2008) Educators and policymakers can address gifted underachievement through changes in classroom and systemwide practices. This issue brief summarizes the issues underlying promising practices for supporting the gifted and talented. It also offers a series of questions to ask when planning schoolwide improvement efforts that address the needs of gifted and talented students—especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and low SES families—who are at risk for underachievement.

**Believing and Achieving** (January 2007) In this issue brief, Craig Jerald takes a look at the role of teacher efficacy—how teachers' beliefs in their own abilities affect student achievement.

#### QUALITY INDICATOR 5: *Effective School Leadership*

**What Does the Research Tell Us About Teacher Leadership?** (2005)

**Teacher Leaders: The Backbone of Sustained Improvement** (also available in PDF format) The December 2005 newsletter defines teacher leadership and offers concrete ways teachers can step forward, sometimes out of their comfort zones, into leadership roles.

**The Role of Principal Leadership in Improving Student Achievement** (also available in PDF format) The September 2005 newsletter summarizes what a recently published literature review titled "How Leadership Influences Student Learning" reveals about the basics of successful education leadership and offers practical suggestions for their implementation.

**Instructional Coaching** (September 2007) In this issue brief, authors Julie Kowal and Lucy Steiner take a look at instructional coaching and elements to look for when selecting, preparing, and evaluating coaches for effectiveness. This is part one of a two-part series.

**Principal as Instructional Leader: Designing a Coaching Program That Fits** (September 2007) In this issue brief, authors Lucy Steiner and Julie Kowal take a look at the role of the principal as instructional leader, including activities such as assessing needs and goals, selecting a coaching strategy, and implementing and supporting the coaching program. This is part two of a two-part series.



**Building Collective Efficacy: How Leaders Inspire Teachers to Achieve** (October 2007) In this issue brief, authors Dana Brinson and Lucy Steiner take a look at how leaders can engage staff to build “collective efficacy,” a perception of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on student learning.

**Using the Classroom Walk-Through as an Instructional Leadership Strategy** (also available in PDF format) The February 2007 newsletter examines the walk-through strategy as a tool for providing instructional leadership.

## QUALITY INDICATOR 6: *Family and Community Engagement*

**Reaching Out to Family and the Community** (April 2009) This issue brief investigates how some high-performing schools are engaging families and citizens to support student achievement.

**What Schools Want Parents to Know** (also available in PDF format and in Spanish) To encourage parent participation, the September 2006 newsletter summarizes five important points about involvement that every parent should know.

**Meeting the Challenge: Getting Parents Involved in Schools** (also available in PDF format) In the August 2005 newsletter, we offer research-based advice and resources designed to help schools and districts foster successful parent involvement.

**Serving Recent Immigrant Students Through School-Community Partnerships** (also available in PDF format) The February 2008 newsletter examines how district and school partnerships with community-based organizations can help schools better meet the needs of recent immigrant students.

An electronic version of the Topical Resource Guide can be found at [www.centerforcsri.org](http://www.centerforcsri.org)



In designing an effective school improvement plan, stakeholders may concentrate on how this new wealth of data can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses and to track whether improvement strategies are making a positive difference. For example, educators often benefit from ongoing support in using data systems that collect and report a range of data. Professional development for teachers in data-driven instruction—as well as ongoing collaboration to routinely analyze data and use that analysis to plan instruction—is vital to making the most of data collection systems. Systems that house formative assessment data can be used to track student progress across subjects and grade levels and to ensure that appropriate instructional interventions are available as needed. Finally, such systems aid educators in regular and frequent reporting of student progress to both students and parents.

Designing effective supports for struggling students relies on frequent formative assessment and is a key to improving educational outcomes. Schools can take steps to bolster student achievement by monitoring student progress toward defined outcomes and providing additional assistance to students who are struggling. A noteworthy strategy is the use of Response to Intervention (RtI) frameworks. These frameworks provide a tiered set of services and interventions for students who are struggling. While RtI has its origins in special education, the practice is gaining credibility for schoolwide use across student populations.

In addition to reliable and valid measures of student performance, educators need access to other data in a timely manner. Indicators such as attendance rates, course completion rates, grades, and discipline records are equally important in clarifying student needs and evaluating success. These “leading indicators” of student performance are useful for identifying struggling students and targeting interventions to meet student needs (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Foley, Mishook, Thompson, Kubiak, Supovitz, & Rhude-Faust, 2008).

#### **QUALITY INDICATOR 4: *Positive School Climate Focused on Achievement***

Students are more likely to perform at high levels in a school environment in which they feel

physically and emotionally safe and supported, and which communicates high expectations for achievement. A school improvement plan can promote school policies that will encourage learning in an atmosphere of connectedness and caring. Schools that are effective in promoting such learning environments are driven by a clear code of conduct that is enforced fairly, consistently, and equitably across all demographic groups. In addition, staff sends consistent messages to students about high academic expectations. Effective schools also attend to issues of transition (e.g., from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school).

What is needed to develop and sustain a positive and supportive school culture will vary widely from school to school. Some schools recognize a need for anti-violence or peer mediation programs. Others may want to focus on raising academic expectations for minority or underprivileged learners. Still others may choose to design and implement consistent behavior expectations across classrooms and buildings.

A growing body of research points to positive supports and preventive measures as a means to reduce problem behavior and increase desirable behavior in schools. Discipline measures such as detention and out-of-school suspension can carry unintended consequences—such as keeping students from classroom instruction or from afterschool enrichment programs—that can exacerbate issues for struggling students. Research also suggests that exclusionary discipline measures fail to teach students appropriate behaviors (National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, 2006; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1992). While suspension can be warranted in some instances, the practice has proved to be more effective when paired with measures to support students in developing study skills or appropriate behaviors (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1992).

In preparing plans to address the issue of creating and maintaining a positive school climate, educators have recognized that youth may need to be taught appropriate behaviors or strategies for resolving conflict and solving problems. Some approaches provide a framework for supporting positive behavior that can be modified to suit the specific

needs of a school community. In other programs, an established curriculum is implemented to address specific aspects of school culture such as problem solving or the prevention of bullying. Some programs aim to improve student behavior and attitudes, while others focus more explicitly on improved academic performance as an outcome. Whichever strategies the plan includes, the intended outcomes should be articulated, clearly communicated, and directly linked to specific measures (e.g., increased attendance, reduced suspensions, demonstration of skills).

### QUALITY INDICATOR 5: *Effective School Leadership*

“There are...no effective reforms without good leadership” (DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, & Haycock, 2007, p. 5). In any school reform and improvement initiative, school leaders must attend to two fundamental tasks: guide the school community in developing a sound, evidence-based plan of action; and motivate people to support and act on the plan (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The principal is central to ensuring an equitable, respectful, and supportive environment focused on high achievement.

The school’s principal has a pivotal role not only in helping design the school improvement plan but also in communicating the plan to staff and the larger community. The building leader also is responsible for managing the plan’s implementation with fidelity.

Leadership practices that can most directly influence student achievement include establishing a school’s purpose and direction, allocating resources to grow and develop expertise, managing time, and building a leadership team with a shared commitment (DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, & Haycock, 2007; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). School leaders can strongly influence other school-level factors that also correlate to student achievement, including school culture, stakeholder participation in decision making, and relationships with parents and the wider community (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

### QUALITY INDICATOR 6: *Family and Community Engagement*

Families and community members participate in all aspects of high-performing schools (e.g., afterschool activities, decision-making teams, supporting student learning in the home). Two-way communication with families and parental engagement in schools positively impact student achievement. School improvement plans may direct attention toward increasing family and community engagement.

Epstein (2007) identifies six types of parental engagement. They are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Each type of parental engagement can present unique challenges. For example, parents who work two jobs may find it difficult to participate in school activities. Families without a home computer or telephone will need alternative avenues for communicating with school staff. Families that are new to the country may have educational expectations that differ from those of the school. Yet, “regardless of a family’s ethnic, cultural, or economic background, parents are interested in the academic achievement of their children...” (Ferguson, 2005, p. 1).

When parents and guardians support education in the home, students achieve. Common methods for collecting data on parent involvement include tracking attendance at school events and meetings, keeping logs of parent contacts, and conducting surveys of parent perceptions. However, two types of parent involvement—parenting and learning at home—are difficult to evaluate. These aspects relate to what Marzano (2003) terms *home atmosphere*, which he maintains has a greater correlation to student achievement than do household income, occupation, or educational attainment. Schools are finding constructive ways to encourage a supportive home environment for education. Clear, frequent communication through a variety of media along with multiple venues to allow for input and feedback from family members fosters awareness of and support for the school’s efforts.

Each school and community is unique, and the strategies a school employs to address parental and

community engagement are best determined from a careful review of data and identified needs. *Asset mapping*—a process of plotting out the available resources and strengths in a community—can serve as a starting point for identifying potential partners. Community and business partnerships can support school improvement goals by providing resources and services. Such partnerships can provide expanded learning opportunities for students, such as afterschool programs, internships, service learning, and community service placements for academic and social skills development.

## After the Plan—A Word About Implementation

Ensuring implementation is a critical component for planning improvement. An improvement plan is best when preparations for implementation and monitoring are included and communicated early.

These monitoring activities are akin to monitoring a medical patient's vital signs. Just as medical personnel observe heart rate and temperature, educators examine attendance rates, grades, formative assessments, and other data to keep tabs on the "health," or direction, of improvement efforts. By identifying the vital signs, or indicators, of successful programs and initiatives in the planning phase, educators will be better prepared to make necessary adjustments.

## Conclusion

The six quality indicators of high-performing schools presented here can provide a structured framework for identifying improvement strategies and crafting a schoolwide improvement plan with the full engagement of key stakeholders. Most schools will find that they have strengths in some of the six quality indicators and can build upon those when developing their comprehensive improvement strategies.

The task of identifying appropriate and evidence-based strategies for improvement begins with a thorough needs assessment and review of effective strategies. Effective implementation of reform and improvement strategies is more likely when planners give careful consideration

to indicators of success and those who will be responsible for tasks such as collecting data, monitoring success, and modifying practice. Ongoing monitoring of data is a powerful means for continuous improvement and communicating success of improvement strategies.

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