



**Exploring the**

**Pathway to**

**Rapid District Improvement**

**Brett Lane**

for the Center on Innovation & Improvement



## Information   Tools   Training

Positive results for students will come from changes in the knowledge, skill, and behavior of their teachers and parents. State policies and programs must provide the opportunity, support, incentive, and expectation for adults close to the lives of children to make wise decisions.

The Center on Innovation & Improvement helps regional comprehensive centers in their work with states to provide districts, schools, and families with the opportunity, information, and skills to make wise decisions on behalf of students.

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## Introduction

Districts are uniquely positioned to be able to play a central role in dramatically improving schools and the teaching and learning that takes place in schools (Applebaum, 2002; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Childress, et al., 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Massell & Goertz, 2002; Rorrer, et al., 2008; Snipes, et al., 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Districts have the ability to develop policy and exert significant control over how improvement efforts are implemented, in that they control resources and make staffing decisions; they have the ability to coordinate professional development and training for all district and school staff; and they have the authority to modify policy to support school-based improvement efforts (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Spillane, 1988; Spillane et al., 2009). However, districts are bureaucratic institutions that also have a tendency to create barriers to dramatic school improvement and are often seen, along with school boards, as a source of any number of issues that stifle creative and innovative school improvement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hess, 1999; Hill et al., 1997).

Over the past 30 years, efforts have been directed towards finding ways to improve individual schools<sup>1</sup> rather than

<sup>1</sup> The New American Schools and the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program illustrate the focus on schools rather than districts, although one of the findings to come out of the NAS

build the capacity of districts to engage in sustainable improvement efforts (Rorrer, et al., 2008). A tremendous amount of learning has come out of efforts to scale-up school improvement efforts (Datnow, 2002; Fullan, 1999; Leithwood, 2006; Schmoker, 1999). We know (for the most part) how to improve schools, but we do not know precisely how to do so at scale (Berends et al., 2002; Hatch, 2002). We also know that districts do have a critical, and perhaps an essential role to play in supporting dramatic and rapid improvement efforts. Recently, state education agencies have pragmatically come to the realization that they cannot support individual schools on a one-by-one basis and are working to figure out ways to build and leverage the capacity of districts to catalyze dramatic improvements in schools and classrooms (Sunderman, 2006; Unger et al., 2008).

Concurrent to the recent (since the early 1990s) research on school improvement is a smaller, yet growing, research base on district improvement consisting primarily of district case studies of improving districts (or of districts that have tried to improve). This body of research has catalogued the various characteristics seen in improving districts and the various district strategies that appear to promote school improvement

effort was that scalable school improvement was not likely without positive involvement from the district and other stakeholders (Berends et al., 2002).

The purpose of this report is to describe a *Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement* and, through the use of two illustrative case stories, explore how districts can engage in rapid and sustainable improvement efforts. The supporting research, our framework, and a corresponding set of rapid improvement indicators is provided here and in the following pages, followed by case stories of **Burton Public Schools** (a rural district in central Kansas) and **Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools**, an urban district with over 19,000 students. Included in the report is a summary of issues for consideration by state officials and districts focused on creating the conditions necessary to catalyze rapid and sustainable district improvement.

and lead to increased student academic performance. The preponderance of evidence from these case studies demonstrates that districts can and do make a difference, and that there are a number of common themes, actions, and strategies that “reforming” districts, as described by McLaughlin and Talbert (2003), do exhibit (see also Rorrer et al., 2008). However, it is one thing to be able to describe the characteristics of an improved school district, and quite another to be able to understand *how* districts embark on the path to rapid and sustainable improvement.

## Rapid District Improvement

### What does the research say about how districts initiate, support, and sustain rapid improvement?

The research and literature on district improvement,<sup>2</sup> including guidance and working documents created by state education agencies,<sup>3</sup> is remarkably consistent with respect to the broad themes and characteristics of improving districts. However, this same body of research can be difficult to apply to real world situations due to its imprecise use of specific concepts and variables and the lack of an overarching framework that explains how the various concepts and

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to the supplemental references for a complete listing of the documents that were used to inform the development of the *Framework* and in our analysis of the research on district improvement.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Shannon, G.S. & Bylsma, P. (2004). *Characteristics of improved school districts: Themes from research*. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Olympia, WA. See also the *Wisconsin characteristics of successful districts*, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, [www.dpi.state.wi.us/](http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/)

variables relate to each other. Stephen Anderson (2003) points out that “discussion on the district role in change is complicated by a lack of consensus on the language for representing district actions and policies associated with educational reforms” (p. 7). The various principles, elements, characteristics, strategies, and actions around district improvement tend to confuse rather than clarify. In general, we know what an improving district looks like, but we don’t know exactly *how* to get there.

Recent studies and synthesis of the literature on district improvement has led to an emerging clarity around the key characteristics of, and strategies used by improving districts (Sykes et al., 2009) and by effective district leaders (Waters & Marzano, 2006). There are recent frameworks, both academic (Rorrer et al., 2008) and action-oriented (Childress et al., 2006; Connell, 2000; Marsh, 2005) that have started to integrate many of the most promising strategies for district improvement. Clearly, districts (especially those with increasing numbers of schools designated as underperforming) need to be able to provide for a system of aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessments; they need to have data systems in place to allow administrators and teachers to use data; and they should have mechanisms to monitor and focus support towards improving instruction. Districts must be willing to reorganize to fully support improvement efforts aimed towards improving instruction. Who would argue against districts having a vision and a theory of change, or that districts should set goals and



develop plans that describe how they will attain these goals. Districts *should* strive for instructional coherence, decrease teacher isolation, cultivate shared responsibility, promote collaborative discussions and problem solving, and develop multiple professional learning communities in schools and across different stakeholder groups. Yet with so many things for an improving district to address and work towards, compounded by the lack of clarity among these strategies and goals, it is hard to know where to start, or what the truly high-leverage strategies might be.

As we reviewed the research and case studies on district improvement, we found that some findings referred to what are considered to be core functions of the district (e.g., to maintain a productive relationship between the school board and the Superintendent, to have an aligned curriculum, and to provide for assessments and data systems). Other findings referred to the beliefs and culture of the entire district, including the propensity of district leaders to ask schools to engage in collective problem solving. And finally, some of the research referred to the specific actions and strategies that an improving district central office might take during its improvement efforts. When we attempted to use the various frameworks to explain how districts went about engaging in rapid improvement, we found them to be useful, but insufficient. Overall, the research on district improvement has much to say about the characteristics of improving districts and less about *how* districts actually

initiate and sustain rapid improvement.

### **What do we mean by rapid district improvement?**

The literature on school turn-around efforts calls for schools to make dramatic improvement over the course of one to two years. Districts, and especially larger urban districts, are unlikely to be able to dramatically improve student performance among all schools over the course of a single year. For the purposes of this report and the broader audience, we define rapid district improvement as something more intensive than traditional improvement efforts (e.g., efforts that often require incremental and continuous improvement), but something less than a full “takeover” of a district central office (Redding, 2009).

Rapid district improvement means that there are:

- ◇ Dramatic changes in district structures, culture, policies, and process within one to three years of the start of the improvement effort;
- ◇ Evidence of significant improvement in instructional practices and student academic performance within three to four years of the start of the improvement effort; and
- ◇ Evidence that changes and improvements are system-wide and sustainable.

### **How do districts engage in rapid district improvement?**

Explaining how districts engage in rapid district improvement requires more than simply understanding the characteristics of an improving district or the expected outcomes of rapid improvement. We found it useful to consider rapid

district improvement through two interrelated lenses: as an *improvement pathway* marked with catalysts, levers, and benchmarks; and as a set of *improvement capacities* that are activated and used by rapidly improving districts throughout their efforts. The specific catalysts and levers—the pathway—may be somewhat different from one district to another, but the pathway points to the possibility of a roadmap that districts and states can use to jumpstart and ultimately guide district improvement efforts. Similarly, the literature and the case studies show that rapidly improving districts cultivate and use a set of improvement capacities that are focused on improving all aspects of the district as a system. Rapidly improving districts develop and then activate their improvement capacities—they activate their improvement infrastructure.

The *Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement* that follows captures the dual notion of rapid district improvement as: (1) a pathway that requires catalysts (e.g., the opportunities, incentives, and capacity) to jumpstart improvement efforts and (2) the development; and use of improvement capacities and specific strategies to develop and sustain the improvement effort. The *Framework* advances ongoing work around district improvement by clarifying the distinction between, and connections among, the core functions of a district, the catalysts (e.g., triggers, events, incentives, opportunities, and minimal threshold of capacity) that must be present if a district is to embark on the path towards rapid improvement, and the capacity of a district to leverage

its core functions to focus exclusively on improving all aspects of the district, including instruction. The *Framework* builds directly upon a review of the research on district improvement and in particular on five recent studies<sup>4</sup> that came closest, in our estimation, to capturing the full extent of what it means for a district to engage in a dramatic and sustained improvement effort. The *Framework* also incorporates what we learned from our intensive site visits with two districts that have demonstrated rapid, and in the case of Kansas City, Kansas, sustained improvement.

### **The Framework: Our Elevator Talk**

Districts that are doing a good job meeting the needs of their students have two things going for them: first, their organization works—they pay their bills on time, the school board and superintendent get along, they support teachers, and they have a solid curriculum that is in schools and classrooms. Second, the district organization as a whole is focused on improving whatever they need to improve so that their students succeed. If something isn't working, they figure out how to fix it. Districts that are

<sup>4</sup> The five studies used extensively to inform *Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement* include: Leithwood, K., et al. (2004). *Review of research: How leadership influences student learning*. Marsh, J. et al. (2005). *The role of districts in fostering instructional improvement: Lessons from three urban districts*. McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J. (2003). *Reforming districts: How districts support school reform. A research report*. Snipes, J., et al. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement*. Rorrer, A., Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J. (2008). *Districts as institutional actors in educational reform*.



failing their students are organizations that are not fulfilling their basic functions. They are not focused on improving. They don't have the capacity to fix what isn't working—and are probably not even aware that it's not working.

When districts engage in rapid improvement, there is a catalyzing event that awakens the district and opens up a window of opportunity allowing the district to take strategic actions that simultaneously change beliefs and improve what isn't working.

## The Framework

### A Conceptual Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement

A conceptual framework<sup>5</sup> is a way of understanding a particular phenomenon, in this case how districts engage in rapid and sustainable improvement, by articulating a set of variables and the relationships among them (Sabatier, 1999). The conceptual framework presented here has three potential uses: (1) as a diagnostic tool, or as a self-assessment that can assist a district (or a state education agency) to better understand what a district needs to do to improve; (2) as a guide for districts actively engaging in district improvement; and (3) as a tool for researchers studying how districts improve as a way of testing hypothesis and advancing research around district improvement.

<sup>5</sup> In comparison to theories, which provide a complex and detailed accounting of the relationships among variables, frameworks account for some relationships and allow for the generation of hypothesis but do not account for all of the relationships among variables.

The *Framework* explicitly integrates the research-based characteristics of improving districts (represented by the core district functions and improvement capacities) with the catalysts and strategies

The *Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement* has three interrelated components:

1. The **core district functions** that a district is responsible for fulfilling, and which are necessary for a district to be able to sustain improvement efforts. The core district functions include:
  - ◇ Management and Operations, focused on the basic functions that need to be carried out in order to operate the district, and
  - ◇ Teaching and Learning, which refer to functions that a district carries out and that are needed for schools and teachers to provide standards-based instruction and support students' learning.
2. A set of **Improvement Capacities**, consisting of district structures, policies, processes, and programs intentionally designed to improve overall organizational capacity and the quality of teacher instruction.
  - Districts develop their capacity for improvement by:
    - ◇ Reorganizing the District Office to Support Improvement Efforts,
    - ◇ Reorienting the Organization and Shifting Culture and Beliefs,
    - ◇ Supporting Collective Problem Solving, and
    - ◇ Building Leadership and Instructional Capacity.
3. A **Rapid Improvement Pathway**, depicting how a district initiates and sustains improvement efforts, including those strategies used to cultivate improvement capacities and improve core district functions.
  - ◇ Phase 1—Catalyzing Conditions for Rapid Improvement
  - ◇ Phase 2—Defining and Communicating a Districtwide Improvement Effort
  - ◇ Phase 3—Becoming an Improvement-Oriented Organization

that districts take to initiate and sustain rapid improvement (the rapid district improvement pathway). Our explanation of the *Framework* begins with a brief description of the core district functions and the

improvement capacities.<sup>6</sup> We then describe the rapid district improvement pathway, outlining the catalysts needed to spur districts to take action and how districts use this window of opportunity to engage in a system-wide improvement effort.

The heart of the framework is contained in our description of how a district becomes an improvement-oriented organization by cultivating its improvement capacities. Once a district is able to make it over the initial set of obstacles (e.g., in phase one and two), *how* the district goes about building its capacity becomes critical to its ultimate success.

<sup>6</sup> The improvement capacities represent specific capacities of improving districts—the characteristics of a high-performing district—and depict those strategies that rapidly improving districts take as they engage in improvement efforts—the actions and the how of district improvement.

## Core District Functions<sup>7</sup>

The district central office is responsible for the management and operation of the district and for ensuring that schools and teachers have the tools and resources needed to support student learning.

**Management and Operations** consist of the basic functions that districts need to be able to carry out in order to operate the district (e.g., administrative, personnel, fiscal management, operations).

<sup>7</sup> Much of the literature on district improvement is curiously devoid of information about the core functions of a district. There is either a presumption that districts are able to fulfill these basic functions, or these functions are included as one of the characteristics of improving districts (e.g., districts develop an aligned curriculum or develop data systems).

### **Management and operational functions include:**

- ◇ An effective and mutually supportive relationship between the School Board and Superintendent or district leadership (e.g., School Board develops and sets policy, advocates for the districts; Superintendent manages the district, including hiring and fiscal management).
- ◇ Ability to develop, communicate, and enforce policies and procedures.
- ◇ Human resources—efficient and streamlined processes that include an explicit connection to supporting Teaching and Learning.
- ◇ Administration and Finance—efficient and streamlined processes for managing district finances, including explicit connection to supporting Teaching and Learning.
- ◇ Operations—efficient upkeep of district buildings and operations (e.g., physical plant, food services, custodial, health and student services).
- ◇ Ability to meet federal and state regulations and compliance requirements.



**Teaching and Learning** functions refer to the responsibility that a district has to provide the tools and resources needed to support teaching and learning. The absence of any one of these capacities greatly diminishes the ability of the district to provide high quality, appropriate instruction to students.

The district establishes, supports, provides, or has access to:

- ◇ An **aligned curriculum** that includes K-12 curriculum frameworks, maps, or guides and sample instructional strategies aligned with state standards and/or grade level expectations.
- ◇ **Districtwide and school-level formative and summative assessments** in literacy, mathematics, and science, providing for aligned assessments within and across grades.
- ◇ **Data systems** for collecting, storing, accessing, and disseminating school and student-level data.
- ◇ **Materials**, including textbooks and curricular materials, as needed for instruction.
- ◇ **Human capital**, which entails that the district has the capacity to recruit, induct, evaluate, retain, and/or release district and school staff, principals, teachers, aides, coaches, and support staff, including specialized instructional support.
- ◇ **Knowledge and expertise** needed to support and train district and school staff on instructional programs, including designated time and opportunity for professional development.

If a district is deficient in too many of these core functions, either around operations or around teaching and learning, it is an unlikely candidate for rapid improvement. There is a threshold of capacity<sup>8</sup> within these core functions that must be met if a district is going to initiate a transformational improvement effort, even with considerable outside assistance. However, it is also likely that a portion of a district's overall improvement efforts would include work toward improving its core functions.

## Improvement Capacities

A central theme of the research on district improvement is that districts that make rapid and dramatic improvement are, to no surprise, focused intensively on improving all aspects of the district as a system, from the central office to classroom instruction. In rapidly improving districts, improvement capacities refer to district *structures, policies, processes, and programs* intentionally designed to improve overall organizational capacity and the quality of teacher instruction.

<sup>8</sup> New Jersey's Quality School Accountability Continuum

<<http://www.state.nj.us/education/genfo/qsac/>> illustrates how one state has grappled with this issue and the difficult questions that arise regarding how directive a state should be in addressing district deficiencies.

Display 1 provides a side-by-side listing of the characteristics (e.g., the structures, policies, processes, and programs) that one would expect to see in a rapidly improving district (column 1) and the types of actions that a district takes to develop and activate its improvement capacities (column 2).

Display 1. Improvement Capacities

<b>Characteristics and Actions Taken by Rapidly Improving Districts</b>	
<b>Rapidly Improving Districts have structures, processes, and programs for:</b>	<b>As districts engage in rapid improvement, they develop their capacity for improvement by:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Strategically allocating and targeting human and fiscal resources</li> <li>◇ Aligning district systems and structures to support district and school improvement efforts</li> <li>◇ Aligning policies to support district and school improvement efforts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Reorganizing the District Office to Support Improvement Efforts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ The district restructures so that all efforts, functions, policies, and actions are supporting the improvement effort</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Establishing and communicating a district-wide improvement strategy, including a vision and specific goals for improvement</li> <li>◇ Developing and communicating policies, mandates, and new programs</li> <li>◇ Establishing and maintaining a focus on equity</li> <li>◇ Coordinating and monitoring district-wide improvement strategies</li> <li>◇ Setting expectations for monitoring and supporting school improvement efforts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Reorienting the Organization and Shifting Culture and Beliefs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Develop an improvement orientation</li> <li>◆ Cultivate shared responsibility</li> </ul>



<b>Characteristics and Actions Taken by Rapidly Improving Districts</b>	
<b>Rapidly Improving Districts have structures, processes, and programs for:</b>	<b>As districts engage in rapid improvement, they develop their capacity for improvement by:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Educators (principals, teachers, administrators) to engage in ongoing (e.g., at least once a week) problem solving around issues related to teaching and learning</li> <li>◇ Incorporating educator-developed strategies and solutions into school and district improvement efforts</li> <li>◇ Supporting and engendering productive attitudes/dispositions, such as trust, willingness to share information, reflection and self-awareness, and willingness to change</li> </ul>	<p><b>Supporting collective problem solving through processes and a strategic mix of strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Provide dedicated time and space for educators to figure out local solutions</li> <li>◆ Allow for and communicate a strategic balance of district parameters and local autonomy</li> <li>◆ Provide educators with the skills needed to engage in ongoing problem solving</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Improving instructional capacity in schools and among district leaders.</li> <li>◇ Analyzing and using data to identify district and school areas for improvement</li> <li>◇ Investigating, identifying, and selecting improvement strategies (e.g., grants, programs, new initiatives) and programs that support and align with the district’s improvement efforts</li> <li>◇ Evaluating the impact of programs and improvement strategies</li> </ul>	<p><b>Building leadership and instructional capacity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Focus improvement efforts on improving instruction</li> <li>◆ Focus improvement efforts on improving relations among adults and among adults and students</li> </ul>

## The Rapid District Improvement Pathway<sup>9</sup>

Based on our review of the literature on district improvement and the experience of the districts profiled in this report, we identified a set of conditions, actions, and strategies that together provide a pathway to rapid improvement. The pathway is presented as having three phases, although it is clear that as districts engage in an improvement effort, they do not see themselves as moving from one phase to the next. We present the pathway in phases to make explicit some of the key triggers and actions that districts must take, or that need to be supported by state education agencies hoping to promote rapid district improvement. The narrative that describes each phase and the connections among the phases articulate a set of working hypothesis based on the framework and the case studies.

<sup>9</sup> Appendix B provides a one-page summary of the Rapid District Improvement Pathway

In brief, the rapid improvement pathway includes: (1) a set of “catalyzing” conditions that need to be present in order for a district to initiate dramatic improvement efforts; (2) the strategic decision by the district to use this window of opportunity to initiate a system-wide improvement effort and build support for this effort; and (3) the district’s explicit development of its improvement capacities, as detailed in Display 2. A detailed explanation of each phase is provided in the following pages.

Display 2. Rapid District Improvement Pathway - Overview

**Catalyzing Conditions  
for Rapid Improvement**



**Defining Districtwide  
Improvement Efforts**



**Becoming an  
Improvement-Oriented  
Learning Organization**

Intensive development of district's improvement infrastructure (systems, structures, and culture that support student learning)

**Phase 1: Catalyzing Conditions for Rapid Improvement**

In order for a district to initiate rapid and successful district improvement, there must be:

- ◇ A *catalyzing event* (or combination of events) that:
  - ◆ Heightens the **awareness** among school board and district leaders of critical academic issues and district deficiencies;
  - ◆ Increases the **urgency** among school board and district leaders to make significant changes; and
  - ◆ Presents a **window of opportunity** (e.g., through changes to policies that create conditions for dramatic change, the availability of funding, access to expertise, external mandates).
- ◇ The existence of a *minimal threshold of capacity* among the school board, district leaders, or principals



Examples of minimal capacity thresholds include:

- ◆ Existence of a strong school board or mayoral support with a positive relationship with a district leader/Superintendent
- ◆ Existence of strong principals and teacher leaders (but limited district leadership or board leadership)
- ◆ Strong school board with the courage and ability to attract and hire high quality leadership, including a Superintendent and other leaders who are change agents

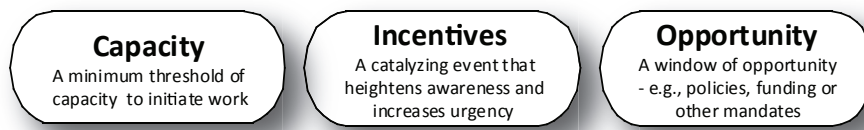
**The current state of affairs is unacceptable and must change**

The catalyzing conditions<sup>10</sup> for rapid improvement involve an event, or a series of events, that galvanizes support and

10 The catalyzing conditions used in the framework—incentives, capacity building strategies, and opportunity—are drawn from Rhim, Hassel, & Redding’s (2008) description of the key elements of statewide systems of support.

urgency for change through an awareness of critical deficiencies in the district’s ability to educate its students, often represented by consistently low and stagnant academic performance and high rates of students dropping out of school. We use the term “catalyzing event” to differentiate from the mere presence of data or other information that shows that students are not achieving as expected. The public disclosure of data and traditional accountability mechanisms are insufficient to trigger dramatic and rapid improvement. Once a district is equipped with the awareness and urgency needed to make change, there needs to be a window of opportunity, such as policies that permit dramatic change or access to funding and expertise, that suggest potential solutions (e.g., a pathway) for the district to seize and act upon. Additionally, there must be a minimal threshold of capacity within the system to initiate action—to not only realize that the current state of affairs is unacceptable, but to commit to initiating the actions needed to change.

**Catalyzing Conditions for Rapid Improvement**



## Phase 2: Defining and Communicating a District-wide Improvement Effort

After a sense of urgency, awareness, and a minimal threshold of capacity has been established:

- ◇ Core district leaders and the school board decide on a district-wide improvement effort that:
  - ◆ Is system-wide, in that the effort encompasses the entire district and all schools in the district;
  - ◆ Is linked to broadly defined needs, but isn't necessarily a written strategic plan; and
  - ◆ Depicts a vision of the district that is dramatically different than the status quo and that will require administrators and teachers to do much more than "tinker around the edges." It will require rapid, intense, and dramatic change.
- ◇ District leaders create an initial base of support. There is a process by which:
  - ◆ The full extent of the improvement effort is communicated and shared with principals, teachers, and key community leaders.
  - ◆ Administrators, principals, and teachers have a

chance to discuss the focus, intensity, and the implications of the improvement efforts (e.g., it will involve significant and rapid changes).

**Here is what we are going to do. We will do this system-wide. This is why we are using this approach, and this is what we envision our district looking like as a result of our actions.**

Once a catalyzing event has occurred and there exists the urgency and a minimal threshold of capacity needed to grasp what is likely to be a fleeting moment of opportunity, the district must make a strategic decision about how it will move forward. Specifically, district leaders, ideally the Superintendent and the school board, must identify and communicate a district-wide improvement effort that will require the entire district (the central office, administrator, principals, teachers, and even students) to change the way they do business. It seems logical that the district identify a course of action that meets its needs; however, what is critical at this time-sensitive juncture is that the district clarify a vision for improvement that will require rapid, intense, and dramatic change. Also critical at this point in the pathway is

**Defining Districtwide Improvement Efforts**

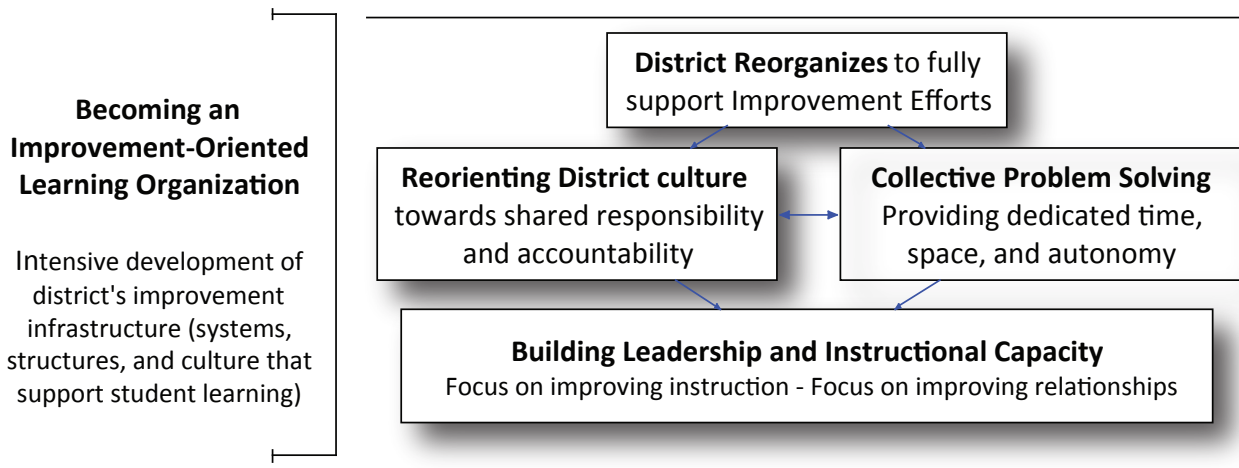
**The District Defines and Communicates its vision and intent to support a Districtwide Improvement Effort**

that the district communicate the full extent of the improvement effort, and in particular its focus and intensity, to principals, teachers, and key community leaders.

**Phase 3: Becoming an Improvement-Oriented Organization**

The District develops its improvement capacities by:

- ◇ Reorganizing the district office so that all efforts, functions, policies, and actions are directly supporting the improvement effort
- ◇ Supporting collective problem solving through processes and strategies that:
  - ◆ Provide dedicated time and space for educators to “figure out” local solutions (the “how to”)
  - ◆ Allow for and communicate a strategic balance of district mandates/parameters and local autonomy
  - ◆ Provide professional development to educators on how to engage in ongoing problem solving
- ◇ Reorienting the district culture and beliefs by:
  - ◆ Becoming improvement oriented
  - ◆ Cultivating shared responsibility
- ◇ Building leadership and instructional capacity by:
  - ◆ Focusing improvement efforts on improving instruction
  - ◆ Focusing improvement efforts on improving relations among adults and among adults and students





**Reorganizing the district office.** Once a district has come to terms with the extent of its failure to meet students' needs and has decided on a system-wide improvement effort, it must then reorganize itself as needed to implement the effort and realize its vision. The reorganization may involve structural changes, shifts in policies, or shifts in the allocation of resources and staff. The reorganization of the district office has multiple implications. First, it sends a clear message throughout the entire system that the district is focused on improvement. Second, it puts in place the structures that will support the administrators and teachers who will do the real work required to improve the system. And third, district policies are aligned to support improvement efforts, which could involve formalizing expectations for improvement and providing schools with the needed flexibility to develop and implement improvement strategies.

**Supporting collective problem solving.** With the structural changes underway and clear expectations having been set for what schools need to do, the district provides schools and teachers with the opportunity, the incentive, and the skills needed to engage in collective problem solving. Dedicated time and space is provided for educators to engage in collaborative discussions focused on improving their schools and classrooms. In order for the schools (e.g., the principal and staff of the school) to make good use of the opportunity to problem solve, district leaders must provide assurances that schools will be able to implement what they

develop, as long as district expectations are met. Defining and communicating a strategic balance of district expectations and local autonomy is essential, as district parameters provide for quality control, and local autonomy is needed to generate high quality solutions. To support collective problem solving, training is provided to educators on how to engage in productive discussions and to be able to use data to assess the effectiveness of all improvement efforts.

**Reorienting district culture and beliefs.** As educators from all levels begin to work to improve how they can support teaching and learning for all students, the district central office considers how it can reinforce a sense of collective responsibility among all educators. Specific actions, such as setting explicit, system-wide expectations for improvement and monitoring schools' efforts to meet these expectations, are used to cultivate shared responsibility. The district communicates a consistent message that is focused on improvement and can best support the implementation and monitoring of school improvement efforts.

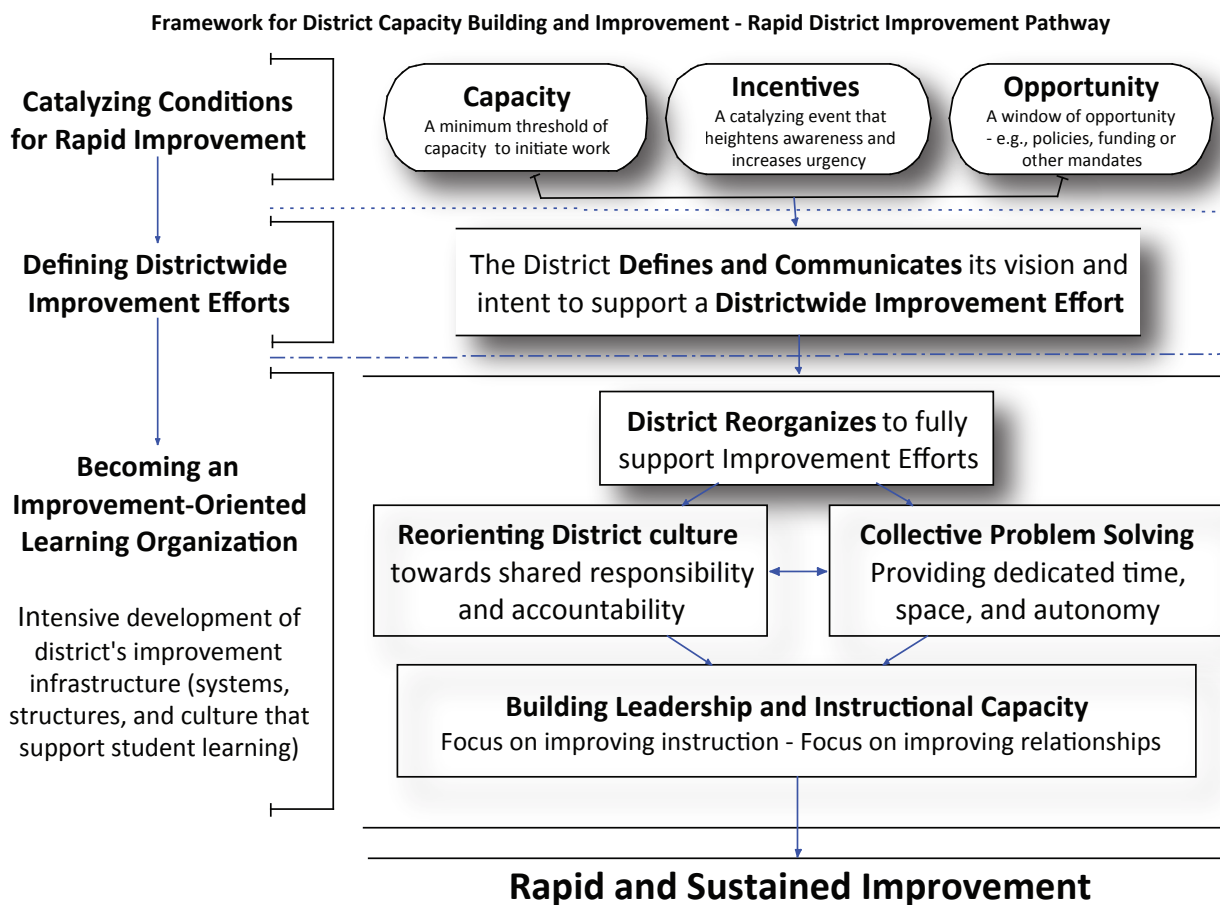
**Building leadership and instructional capacity.** The strategies and actions depicted here, such as reorganizing the district office, having schools and teachers engage in active problem solving, and designing processes that model collective responsibility, can all take place over the course of a single year. Once the foundation for rapid improvement is developed, targeted work towards dramatically improving

classroom instruction can begin.<sup>11</sup> Teachers begin to work together to examine data because they have the time, incentive, and skills to do so. Coaches and principals work productively with teachers to examine instructional practices because teachers trust that they can open their doors and actively examine their own practice without fear. Principals share strategies and ideas with their colleagues and with district officials because there is collective responsibility for all students. Transformational instructional practices of the scope needed to sustain rapid improvement can only be achieved if the entire district is focused intensively on improving learning within and across the system.

The complete *Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement* and the *Rapid District Improvement Pathway* is depicted in Figure 1. A full-page version of the *Framework* and a matrix of the Framework elements, variables, and indicators for each framework element are provided in Appendix C.

Figure 1. Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement<sup>12</sup>

*The Framework integrates the core district functions and improvement capacities with the catalyzing conditions and strategies needed to initiate a process of rapid improvement. The framework includes 8 interdependent variables and depicts the relationships among the variables.*



<sup>11</sup> There is a strong emphasis in the literature on district improvement that improving districts focus almost exclusively on instructional improvement (Sykes, et al. 2009; Elmore, 1993). Our framework, and the evidence from the case studies, suggests that while improving instruction is an important goal, there are prerequisites that must be met if a district is to be able to truly impact the instructional core, and do so rapidly and with some element of sustainability.

<sup>12</sup> A more detailed framework that includes the core district functions is included in the Appendix C, which also includes a detailed listing of the indicators corresponding to each framework element.

## Introduction to Case Studies

The two districts profiled in this report, Burrton Public Schools and Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, serve as exemplary cases depicting how urban and rural districts can engage in rapid improvement. Each case provides specific examples of what was necessary to initiate improvement efforts, the key strategic decisions made by the district to initiate its improvement efforts, and how each district built its capacity for improvement, and thus its ability to impact instruction. The cases are organized according to the framework, focusing in particular on the pathway, or story, of each district.<sup>13</sup> We invite readers to engage with each district's story, to ask questions, and to consider how the success of these two districts might be replicated.

### District Profiles in Brief

Burrton Public Schools,  
Burrton, Kansas

- ◇ 275 students
- ◇ 28 certified teachers
- ◇ Student populations is over 95% White
- ◇ 50% free/reduced lunch

In five years (since 2004), student academic performance increased from 50 to 60% (in reading and math) to 91.7% proficiency in reading and 87.5% proficiency in math (Spring 2009).

Kansas City, Kansas Public School (KCKPS)

- ◇ 19,000 students
- ◇ Diverse student population (44% African-American, 35% Hispanic, 25% ELL)
- ◇ 80% free/reduced lunch

The percentage of KCKPS students proficient in reading increased from 11% in 1996 to 58% in 2008. Similarly, the percentage of students proficient in math increased from 3% in 1996 to 56% in 2008.

*How did these two districts make such rapid improvement?*

<sup>13</sup> Appendix A provides a description of the case study methodology and protocols.



## Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS): A Case Study of a Rapidly Improving District

### Introduction

Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) is an urban school district located in Wyandotte County, directly across the river from Kansas City, Missouri. KCKPS serves over 19,000 economically and ethnically diverse students. 44% of its students are African American, 35% are Hispanic, and 17% Caucasian. Upwards of 80% of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and 25% are English language learners. Over the past 12 years, KCKPS has experienced some of the most significant student achievement gains seen in the country, especially when compared with similarly situated districts. The percentage of KCKPS students proficient in reading increased from 11% in 1996 to 58% in 2008. Similarly, the percentage of students proficient in math increased from 3% in 1996 to 56% in 2008.

### The Context

In 1996-97, Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) was not unlike other mid-size urban districts. The district office was organized to meet its functional demands, focused on curriculum and instruction, operations, human resources, and finance. There was some focus on school improvement, but such efforts were not implemented systematically across the district. The district lacked a common curriculum and did not have the systems or a common language needed to consider, analyze, and discuss student achievement and data. In schools, teachers working in isolation with the classroom door shut were considered the norm and “professional.” Most teachers did not work in teams, so conversations regarding teaching and learning were dependent on individual motivation. Instruction was inconsistent, and students' grades were subjective within and across schools. Essentially, teachers judged students' performance on “what they taught.” A number of schools, and especially the high schools, experienced some violence among students, and student performance across all grades and subjects was extremely low. Perhaps most telling was

the fact that up until 1996-97, the system—its teachers, leaders, and the school board—did not recognize the significantly poor performance of their students, and in essence, the failure of the district to provide its students with a quality education. It was as though a cycle of low expectations and declining student performance had created a culture of apathy and lack of improvement.

### Evidence of Rapid and Dramatic Improvement

Beginning in 1997, KCKPS initiated a system-wide improvement effort that dramatically altered the “way [we] did business.” The improvement effort involved significant changes in district and school organizational structures directed towards strengthening relationships and improving instruction, a recasting of the relationship between the district and individual schools that provided “defined autonomy” to principals, and the creation of a culture of improvement and shared accountability that has become pervasive and embedded in the thinking and actions of educational professionals across the district. The first real gains in student performance were realized in 2001, within four years of initiating the reform. Over a period of 10 years, the percentage of students proficient in math increased by over 50 points (from 3% to 53%) and in reading by over 40 points (from 11% to 53%). Graduation rates rose from 52.5% in 2000 to 78.4% in 2007. Dramatic gains were seen in all schools, including the district's signature exam school, Sumner Academy of Arts and Science, which saw students' proficiency increase from 60% in the early years of the reform to over 95% proficiency in math and reading by 2007. Not satisfied with its progress, KCKPS, under the leadership of its current Superintendent, Dr. Jill Shackelford, initiated “Phase II” of its improvement efforts in 2005, which involves an even more intense focus on improving instruction and aims to provide a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” to all students. David A. Smith, the Assistant to the Superintendent, marks this transition as “moving from structures to beliefs.” Student

academic achievement goals for 2010 are set at 85% for reading and 75% for math. Most recently, district leaders met and drafted a guidance document that reestablishes its commitment to *First Things First* and articulates how it will build upon these principles moving forward.

*What are the strategies that contributed to KCKPS' dramatic improvement?*

## Key Strategies Supporting Dramatic Improvement

**Adoption and full implementation of a system-wide reform effort**, *First Things First*, in all schools, provided the guiding principles and parameters for the district's improvement efforts. It called for the creation of smaller learning communities in all schools and placed increased focus on improved teacher/teacher and teacher/student relationships.

**Consistent and strong school board leadership** actively supported district leaders and were key drivers in communicating the message of reform to the community. The school board was willing to take risks by setting policy to support the implementation of *First Things First*, even in the face of potential public criticism and the lack of instant improvement.

**A fundamental restructuring of district office structures, policies, and use of resources** focused exclusively on the implementation of *First Things First*. In particular, the district, with the full support of the school board: (1) reassigned and placed district staff in schools as instructional coaches, and (2) created a new position of Executive Director of Instruction responsible for overseeing principals and instructional coaches in each K-8 cluster of schools and in the high school cluster.

**The strategic implementation of regular cross-school learning communities among various groups** (e.g., principals, instructional coaches) and the use of weekly "early release Wednesdays" provided dedicated time and space

for teachers and leaders to work collaboratively towards improving their schools and the district. Initially used to support the implementation of *First Things First*, the learning communities developed into ongoing forums for analyzing all types of data needed to improve school structures, change policies, and improve instruction.

**Providing schools with "defined autonomy"** granted principals and teachers the autonomy to determine how to best implement *First Things First* in their local school and provided principals with flexibility and control over budget, staffing, and schedule. In return, schools were held accountable for addressing the parameters of *First Things First* and meeting defined performance objectives.

**Shifted the focus from teaching to "teaching for learning" through the implementation of a benchmarking system**, in which middle and high school students know exactly what they need to demonstrate to pass a course, articulated as a set of "I Can" statements aligned with standards. Student grades (A, B, C, and Incomplete—I) are based solely on attainment of benchmarks (e.g., teachers do not consider behavior, attendance, or other factors in assigning grades). Students receiving an Incomplete are given additional opportunities to pass the benchmarks, and turn the "I" into a grade.

## Catalyzing Conditions for Rapid Improvement

*There was this infamous meeting that we all remember where the superintendent showed the district leadership and the administrators what our data really looked like. That was pivotal. You think that as educators that we use data to drive instruction, but back then we didn't really. As long as we thought our kids were moving, we didn't look at the data. So at that point when we saw the data, we knew we had to do something.*

Dr. Cynthia Lane,  
Current Associate Superintendent for  
Instruction and Business

## Incentives and Urgency for Change - A Fortunate Convergence of Events

In 1995, Superintendent Jim Hensley and other leaders in the district, including Associate Superintendent Bonnie Lesley, began to ask hard questions about student performance. An internal report, highlighting the poor performance of students in reading and mathematics, was generated and shared with the school board. Board members were shocked by the data, and there was general consensus that action needed to be taken. However, how the district would proceed was yet to be determined.

At the same time that KCKPS was coming to grips with its overall performance, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (Kauffman), a national foundation based in Kansas City, Missouri, began to work with Jim Connell and the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE). At the request of the Kauffman Foundation, IRRE developed a white paper describing *First Things First*, a district-wide approach to school improvement based on research in youth development. Finding *First Things First* to be a promising approach to improving schools, Kauffman began a search for urban districts that would be willing to adopt *First Things First* as a district-wide comprehensive reform effort. In May 1996, Kauffman and IRRE invited the Kansas City, Missouri school district and KCKPS to a joint meeting to learn more about *First Things First* and the potential for funding to support a district-wide implementation of *First Things First*.

KCKPS' Board and district leaders wasted little time in deciding to pursue the opportunity presented by Kauffman and IRRE. KCKPS sent its top leaders and a Board member to the May 1996 meeting, leading to the decision by the Board in fall 1996 to formally adopt *First Things First* as its district-wide reform model and to formalize a joint partnership with IRRE and Kauffman to secure support and funding for the initiative. The decision to engage with *First Things First* was made in a top-down manner, with only the Superintendent, a core set of

district leaders, and the Board involved in the decision. It was also at this point that district leaders incorporated *First Things First* into its Desegregation Exit Plan, providing added impetus and justification for moving forward.

In late fall 1996, district leaders and Jim Connell of IRRE held the kick-off roundtable meeting with over 50 district staff and school leaders, including principals. Acknowledging the top-down manner in which *First Things First* was selected, the purpose of the meeting was to share the *First Things First* framework and to create the urgency and buy-in among school leaders needed to move forward with the initiative. Steve Gering, former Deputy Superintendent and one of the architects of KCKPS improvement efforts, recounted that when principals and district staff were presented with hard facts regarding the district's dismal performance, including a visual display of what it meant for students, "there were audible gasps among the room, and people left the auditorium in tears. After that point, we never had an argument about needing to do something."

## Threshold Capacity for Improvement

In the spring of 1997, and only 4 or 5 months into planning to implement *First Things First*, Superintendent Hensley announced his retirement. Coupled with the top-down nature of the district's decision to adopt *First Things First*, there were those in the district, including a number of high-level district leaders, principals, and the leadership of the local teachers' union, that thought that "this too will pass," and that the district would soon move on to its next improvement effort. In the face of these challenges and the potential lapse in leadership, the school board took actions to ensure that the *First Things First* initiative would not falter. The Board made the decision to appoint an interim Superintendent from within the district, with the sole task that "he continue to support *First Things First*." Essentially, the Board became the "face of the district" during the 1997-98 school year and took on increased leadership responsibility during this critical period of time.



The school board carefully considered whether or not to select the new superintendent from within the ranks of the district or to bring in someone from the outside. The Board held a series of community forums to obtain input regarding the hiring of a new Superintendent, as well as to communicate the importance of the *First Things First* initiative. The results of the community forums were inconclusive, as approximately 50% of the community wanted someone external to the district, and the other half preferred that the new superintendent have experience within the district. After careful deliberation, the Board selected a trusted, respected, and established leader from within KCKPS. Superintendent Ray Daniels, formerly the Director of Human Resources, was chosen to lead KCKPS in its efforts to dramatically improve learning and student performance. Upon his hiring, the first words spoken by Superintendent Daniels to his colleagues in the district was “we’re going to do *First Things First*, and we are going to do it right!” Reflecting upon this decision, Board president Gloria Willis said that hiring Ray Daniels was the best decision that they (the Board) ever made.

## Actions Supporting Rapid Improvement

### Incentives

A public and district-driven sharing of data on student performance led to the initial awareness—an “awakening”—among district leaders regarding the critically poor performance of its students (and by default, the district) and generated a strong sense of urgency within the school board. After selecting *First Things First* in a top-down fashion, and in order to create urgency and buy-in among school leaders, IRRE and district leaders convened a district Roundtable that is still remembered 10 years later as the seminal event that created the urgency and incentive to change—it opened up a window of opportunity.

### Opportunity

The availability of Kauffman Foundation Funding and *First Things First* as a model for reform provided a tangible opportunity for KCKPS, with respect to additional funding and a model for addressing its needs. The requirement to develop a federally mandated desegregation exit plan prompted the district to begin to look at student performance data and provided an opportunity for the district to make changes.

### Capacity

A threshold of untapped internal capacity, evidenced by the emergence of strong school board leadership, strong district leadership, including the hiring of Superintendent Ray Daniels and the 2004 hiring of Superintendent Jill Shackelford, and ongoing leadership of current and past school improvement facilitators, provided the foundation needed to support the implementation of *First Things First*.

## Defining and Communicating a System-wide Improvement Effort

*If you are really serious about it and you are going to make comprehensive change, you can't just tinker around the edges. You need to make comprehensive changes that dramatically impact all the stakeholders in the district, including parents, community members, teachers, principals, custodians, food service...everyone. What made this (First Things First) work has to be the fact that we did this Pre-K to 12 across the entire district and that everyone across the district knew the vision, had a common language, and knew that we were going to stay with it.*

Former Superintendent Ray Daniels

Even before Ray Daniels was selected to lead KCKPS, the Board, district leaders, and IRRE were hard at work creating an initial base of support and communicating a common message to all schools and stakeholders. *First Things First* and its Seven Critical Features of school reform provided the heart of the district’s message, setting the framework and guiding parameters for all of the work in the district and its schools.

### ***First Things First:* Seven Critical Features of School Reform**

For Students, schools are organized to:

1. Increase instructional time and provide a lower student/adult ratio during core instructional periods;
2. Provide continuity of care across the school day, across the school years, and between school and home (e.g., the creation of smaller learning communities and a family advocacy program);
3. Set high, clear, and fair academic and behavioral standards that clearly define what students will know and be able to do; and
4. Provide enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, perform, and be recognized.

For Adults, schools are organized to:

5. Assure collective responsibility for improvement in student performance;
6. Provide instructional autonomy and support; and
7. Allow for flexible allocation of available resources.

The importance of *First Things First*—the framework provided through seven critical features and the support provided by IRRE and funded by the Kauffman Foundation—cannot be over-emphasized. The critical features provided, and provide to this day, the foundation upon which KCKPS has been able to make its impressive gains. However, the lessons to be learned from this case stem from how the district was able to transform itself into a high capacity and high functioning organization as needed to fully implement *First Things First*.

One of the first strategic actions taken by the Board and Superintendent Daniels was to provide a clear, consistent, and regular message that *First Things First* was a system-wide improvement effort, that the reform was going

to involve every school, and that engaging in this work was going to require dramatic shifts in what was expected of school staff. District leaders made a strategic decision to frame discussions and communication in terms of improvement, focusing on “how can we improve” instead of blaming others. The message of *First Things First* was communicated to the community through a set of stakeholder forums and to each school through IRRE facilitated roundtable sessions. The roundtables were designed to share the *First Things First* framework and create urgency among school leaders and staff.

#### **Actions Supporting Rapid Improvement: Communicating a System-wide Improvement Effort**

The District adopted *First Things First* as a single comprehensive approach to school improvement that provided a set of seven critical features to be implemented in all schools and a framework to guide implementation.

The District used a set of communication mechanisms and processes (e.g., school roundtables, community forums, school-based stakeholder committees) to communicate a clear, consistent, and regular message about the district’s improvement efforts, in particular that *First Things First* was to be implemented districtwide, and that the district was focused on improving all systems and structures.

The District decided to phase in the improvement efforts, starting with the Wyandotte cluster as the first of four clusters of schools to plan for and implement *First Things First*.

The District made a few early, but critical shifts in the organization of the district office that served to reinforce the message and work of *First Things First*. In particular, the district created a formal position of Director of School Improvement and assigned School Improvement Facilitators to the first cluster of schools.

## Moving Toward Rapid Improvement

A series of events provided the impetus and foundation for KCKPS to initiate its journey on the pathway to rapid improvement. A candid analysis of its data led to an awakening and sense of urgency among the Board and district leaders. The fortunate, but not altogether uncommon, availability of foundation funding and a reform model provided an opportunity and a framework for the district to access and use. And by tapping existing capacity within the Board and among district leaders, the district was able to withstand an initial period of instability. Once the decision was made to engage in a system-wide reform effort, the Board and the district shared the comprehensive nature of the improvement effort with multiple stakeholder groups, setting its course for the coming years. However, the difficult and very real work of changing structures, beliefs, and instruction had yet to occur.

## Becoming an Improvement-Oriented Learning Organization

The story of KCKPS' improvement efforts is complex and multifaceted. The story involves the generous support and funding provided by the Kauffman Foundation, the intensive consultation and expertise provided by Jim Connell and IRRE, the hard work and leadership of district leaders, Board members, principals, teachers and professional staff, and community support. One can only imagine the day-to-day and month-to-month negotiations, discussions, and debates that likely occurred over the course of the first 3 to 4 years of the district's efforts, as the reform moved from the first cluster, Wyandotte, to the second, and ultimately the third and fourth clusters of schools. Multiple individuals and stakeholders—principals, teachers, the union, the community—played a significant role during different points in the district's overall path to improvement.

It is impossible to tease out the many obstacles that were overcome and the role that different individuals had along the way. Doing so may not shed light on the key lessons and takeaways for similar districts striving to engage in rapid and sustainable improvement. Fortunately, the story of KCKPS' success does illustrate a number of powerful, and potentially transferable, actions and strategies that can be used to drive district-wide reform.

Broadly speaking, KCKPS' story is the story of a district that capitalized on a combination of urgency and opportunity and used this window of opportunity to direct all of its energy and strategic thinking on how to improve itself. *First Things First* provided the guiding framework for improvement, but it was the district, with ongoing and much-needed support from the school board, that created systems and structures for implementing *First Things First*. In doing so, KCKPS created and subsequently transferred a culture of improvement to its schools, principals, teachers, and students. So how did this happen?

KCKPS made a number of strategic decisions throughout its improvement effort, such as reorganizing and aligning district office structures and policies, creating formal structures for learning and analyzing data, and implementing the reform in all schools. However, the one theme that runs consistently throughout the actions and course of KCKPS' improvement efforts is that KCKPS provided district and school leaders, including teachers and staff, with the skills, time, and responsibility for figuring out how to implement the seven critical features of *First Things First*. In doing so, KCKPS promoted active and engaged problem solving within and across schools, rather than inducing passive (and often resistant) implementers (e.g., principals and teachers) of policies and strategies that are developed and often mandated by officials or experts outside of the system. By setting "both non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, while providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority



for determining how to meet those goals<sup>14</sup> and developing district structures and processes that permitted schools to meet this responsibility, KCKPS created an effective system of improvement that it continues to leverage to this day.

## Key Features of KCKPS' Improvement Effort

### Key Feature #1: Reorganizing the District Office to Support Improvement Efforts

A central feature of KCKPS' improvement efforts is its continual rethinking of how the district central office should be structured and organized to support district-wide improvement efforts. At the onset of its reform efforts, Superintendent Hensley and a core team of district leaders realized that the district office needed to change if *First Things First* was to have any chance of being successful. Analyzing the organization of the district through the lens of how to best support *First Things First*, they decided that having two Executive Directors of School Operations (each responsible for operations within two clusters of school) and a somewhat large Office of Curriculum with over 30 staff, most of whom spent little to no time in schools, would be counterproductive. Overall, the district office had little direct coordination and monitoring of school improvement efforts and no formal mechanisms in place to provide for such monitoring.

Between 1997 and 1999, the district made two organizational changes that formalized its commitment to district-wide reform. First, the district established a formal position of Executive Director of School Improvement, charged with supporting and implementing the district's improvement efforts (which at this time involved implementing *First Things First* in the Wyandotte Cluster). Second, the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent selected and

<sup>14</sup> FTF Phase II – Guiding Document, as quoted from Waters, T., & Marzano, R. J. (2006)

reassigned over 20 district staff, many from the Office of Curriculum, to be housed in targeted schools as designated School Improvement Facilitators. The establishment of a senior level director of school improvement, replacing one of the two directors of school operations, and the shift of district staff to work directly in schools, focused on supporting school improvement, sent a message to the entire school community—principals, teachers, and support staff alike—that the district office and leaders were going to stick with *First Things First*.

**Creating Instructional Executive Directors of Instruction.** As the implementation of *First Things First* progressed, district leaders continued to think strategically about how the district was organized. In 2001, district leaders “realized that the district structure was no longer feasible,” due to the fact that *First Things First* was being implemented in four clusters. Building upon the original position and role of the first Executive Director of School Improvement, the district gradually increased the number of Executive Directors, beginning with two in 2001, and then moving to four and ultimately five Executive Directors in 2008, responsible for the four K-8 Clusters and the High School cluster. To clarify the role of the Executive Directors and to emphasize their role in improving instruction in schools, the name was first changed from Executive Director of School Improvement to Executive Director of Instruction and most recently to Instructional Executive Directors (IEDs). As KCKPS shifted into Phase II of its reform and focused more intensively on changing instruction, the IEDs, while still district-level staff, have taken on increasing responsibility for monitoring school improvement efforts and working directly with schools, typically through their supervision of the principal and Instructional Coach<sup>15</sup> in each cluster school.

<sup>15</sup> Formerly called School Improvement Facilitators; the district changed the facilitators formal title to “instructional coaches” to meet a requirement from the state regarding the use of federal professional development funds.

**Aligning Structures to Support Improvement.**

The Instructional Executive Directors emerged as the central means by which the district monitors and supports school improvement efforts. The success of the district’s system of support stems from its innovative use of the IEDs. First, the IEDs serve as the formal link, or intermediary, between the district and individual schools and are responsible for monitoring school improvement efforts and supervising the principal and Instructional Coach in each school (within their cluster). Second, the IEDs are valued and trusted by school staff, which allows them to dually monitor and support. The innovative construction of supervisory roles creates a situation in which principals and instructional coaches work together to build school-based instructional capacity. And as trusted leaders, the IEDs are able to support ongoing learning within and across schools. Figure 2 shows the working relationships between the IEDs and local schools and how the relationships are intended to impact school improvement efforts.

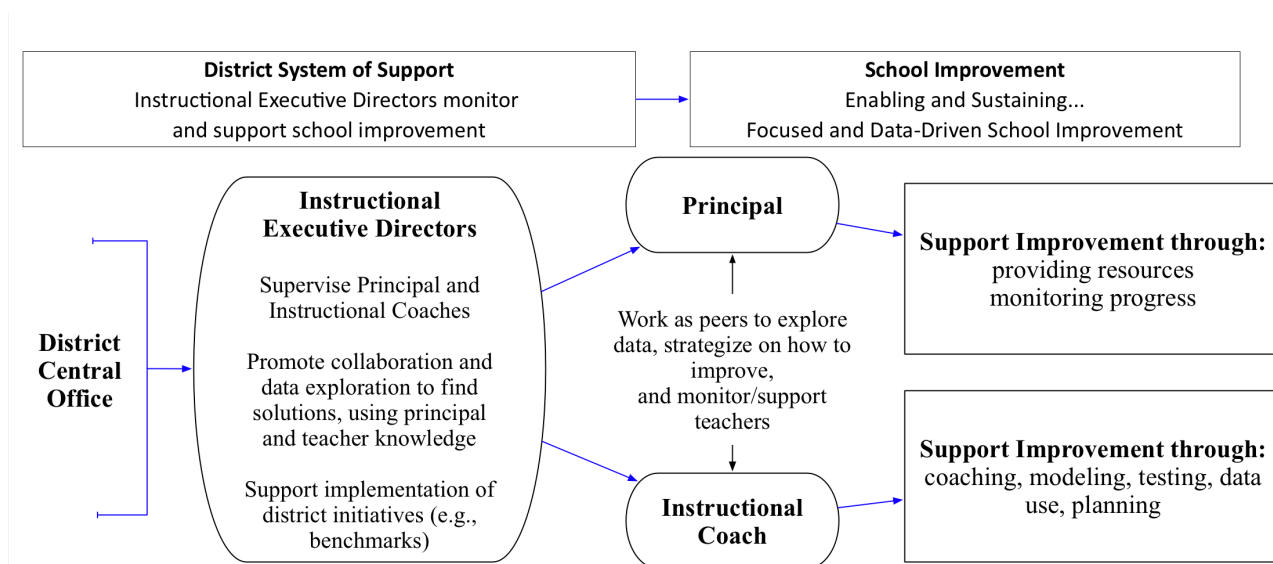
**Aligning Policies to Support Improvement.** As the district began to change how it functioned and was organized to support improvement,

the Board and district leaders realized that changes in policy were necessary for the organizational changes to be fully effective. In addition to including *First Things First* in its Exit Desegregation Plan, the district began to formalize the concept of Defined Autonomy (described in detail in the next section), which involved providing schools and principals with increased flexibility over staffing, scheduling, and control over the budget. Recognizing the likelihood that schools may have different schedules and staffing patterns, the district worked with the teachers’ union to include a provision in the teacher’s contract, called “contract flex,” that allowed schools to quickly propose changes to staffing and scheduling and have these changes approved by the union on a school-by-school basis.<sup>16</sup>

Reorganizing the district office, including aligning structures and policies to support its improvement effort, was critical to KCKPS’ early

<sup>16</sup> While *First Things First* and the seven critical features were not formally mentioned in the teachers’ contract, there was an understanding among district officials and union representatives that the seven critical features and school improvement goals would be included in the criteria by which proposed staffing and scheduling changes would be assessed and approved.

Figure 2. Depiction of Relationship between Instructional Executive Directors and School Leaders



success in implementing district-wide reform efforts and remains critical to efforts to sustain and build upon its successes. Without the reorganization, there would not have been the supports needed to develop smaller learning communities in every school, to provide school leaders with the training and time needed to figure out how to implement the seven critical features, or the instructional supports that would allow teachers in small learning communities to begin to change their instruction. In the second phase of KCKPS' improvement effort, the district continues to consider how it is organized to support schools through deliberate modification of the roles and expectations of the IEDs and the recent creation of two district-level Executive Directors for Teaching and Learning.

## Key Feature #2: Supporting Collective Problem Solving

### Defined Expectations + Local Autonomy: The Foundation for Collective Problem Solving.

As *First Things First* was being rolled out in the Wyandotte Cluster, district leaders, with the backing of the school board, decided that it would be a mistake to mandate too much of the *First Things First* model. Instead, they decided to grant schools a significant amount of flexibility in deciding how to address the seven critical features. This decision was not an easy one to make, as it required that the district place a significant amount of trust in local school leaders and teachers. It also meant that the district would have to accept that some schools might be unsuccessful in their first attempt to develop smaller learning communities, a family advocacy system, or other components of *First Things First*. District leaders recounted that it was often a personal struggle for them to allow schools to go down a path that they knew (or thought) wasn't right. But these same district leaders reflected that "if we had gone in and mandated what the schools needed to do, we would have lost them right there." In a similar vein, the district sometimes had to restrain IRRE from pushing too much and telling schools what needed to be done. The early decision to provide schools

with the autonomy and flexibility to develop customized structures and processes was crucial in that it created an atmosphere of trust and an emerging culture of improvement. As KCKPS has continued to refine the relationship between the district central office and individual schools, they have come to refer to this relationship as "defined autonomy,"<sup>17</sup> borrowing from the work by Waters and Marzano (2006) on effective school district leadership practices.

### Institutionalizing Collective Problem Solving.

Over the course of its improvement efforts, KCKPS instituted a number of formal meeting structures intended to support the implementation of *First Things First* and promote learning and problem solving across the district. According to many in the district, the development of "Early Release Wednesdays" was perhaps the most crucial of all of the decisions made by the district. The story of how Early Release Wednesdays came to be, and what it has become, illustrates KCKPS' overall approach to improvement.

*Apart from initially adopting First Things First, having the Wednesday afternoon sessions was perhaps the most instrumental action that we made and was key to changing teaching and learning.*

Steve Gering, Former Deputy Superintendent

Early in the second year of the reform (1998-99), a number of principals and teachers began to voice concerns that they didn't have enough time to look at data and figure out how to implement the seven critical features. Funding from the Kauffman Foundation had provided for considerable planning time and training during the initial planning year, but it was clear that schools needed additional, ongoing time to continue to work through issues. District leaders and the Board listened to the pleas of principals and teachers and came to the realization, through lengthy discussions and the gathering of additional input from principals, that schools

<sup>17</sup> "Defined autonomy" articulates the relationship between the district and schools, in which the district sets non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, while providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals (see Waters, T., & Marzano, R. J., 2006).

needed at least two hours “of dedicated time, each week, to work on implementing and to spend time thinking about what improvement needs to happen.”<sup>18</sup> When the Board went to the community to secure its support, parents and community members had multiple concerns, not the least of which was what would happen to the students each week, during two hours of unsupervised time. According to Gloria Willis, Board president, the Board spent considerable time sharing information with the community and describing why early release was necessary. Ultimately, the Board went to the faith community and the broader business community for support, and “they opened their doors—the churches, fire stations, YMCA and YWCA—they provided after school services.” With support from the community, the Board was willing to take the risk and change policy so that every school would have a two-hour early release each Wednesday afternoon.

Early release Wednesdays provide principals, instructional coaches, and teachers with the dedicated time and space to look at data and figure out how to improve their school. Depending on the needs of the school, teachers might work in their smaller learning communities or as a full faculty, looking at data and asking questions focused on improving teaching and learning. During the first few years, the district exercised more control over the content and focus of early release Wednesdays, using this time to train principals and teachers on data use as well as to work through the myriad of issues related to implementing smaller learning communities. Over the past 5 to 6 years, as all schools have implemented the structures needed to meet the seven critical features, the early release Wednesdays have become more building/school driven and function as a formal learning community.

In addition to early release Wednesdays, KCKPS developed other district-wide and school-level mechanisms intended to drive the implementation of *First Things First* and promote collective

#### **Key characteristics of KCKPS use of the weekly two hour staff development**

- ◇ Principals and Instructional Coaches jointly develop the agenda for each Wednesday, based on current issues and needs.
- ◇ The school’s entire professional staff is required to attend.
- ◇ Data (including, but not limited to student data) is used to inform ongoing inquiry and decision-making.
- ◇ Just as teachers are asked to alter instructional strategies to meet student needs, the weekly meetings provide time for the school to make real-time adjustments to processes and programs.
- ◇ Teachers are encouraged to take risks and ask “why” questions focused on improving the school.

problem solving. Within schools, the formation of smaller learning communities and common planning time provided teachers with daily opportunities to collaborate around the day-to-day work of improving instruction. Across the district, KCKPS developed meeting structures specifically designed for principals, instructional coaches, and IEDs to work together to address how to improve, as well as to capture information about what was, or wasn’t working that could inform how the district could work best as a system. The cross-district meeting structures currently used by KCKPS include:

- ◇ Monthly **Leadership Team meetings** that include district leaders (e.g., Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and other key district leaders), the IEDs, principals, and instructional coaches.
- ◇ Monthly **Cluster Team meetings** that include the IEDs, principals, instructional coaches, and sometimes teachers, focused on a single question: How can we improve?

<sup>18</sup> Noted by Board President Gloria Willis



◇ Biweekly **instructional coaches meetings** that include the IEDs

The cross-district meeting structures used by KCKPS did not automatically lead to a culture of improvement and collective problem solving. Rather, these meeting structures provided the infrastructure upon which dramatic improvement and learning could take place—an infrastructure that had to be activated for it to be useful. The development and institutionalization of the concept of defined autonomy was a crucial factor in KCKPS' ability to create meaningful within- and across-district meeting structures. Once principals and teachers began to realize that their work was valued and that they were being entrusted with the responsibility to improve their school, there was an increased willingness and incentive to share and learn with others across the district. As a result, cross-district meetings took on an added value, as these meetings could be used to share ideas, innovations, and strategies in addition to making sense of district policies. Similarly, the capacity and willingness of district administrators and principals to engage in productive sharing and problem solving allowed district officials to design new and innovative meeting structures, with the knowledge that such structures would be used to support learning and build collective responsibility. To support the discussions taking place in the various meeting structures, KCKPS invested heavily in developing the skills and capacity of educators across the district to be able to engage with each other in teams and to share expertise and knowledge.

**Leadership Capacity Building.** Over the course of its improvement efforts, KCKPS made a conscious effort to provide training and skills to its leaders around how to work in teams, to ask critical questions and focus on data, and to work as a learning community. For instance, some of the original School Improvement Facilitators and current IEDs recalled participating in efficacy training and other training from the Learning Exchange, a Kansas City-based not for profit education organization, focused on collegial

learning and sharing. Throughout the course of its improvement efforts, the district has actively solicited input and presentations from thought leaders from across the country, to provide fresh ideas but also to critique and provide suggestions that could improve their district. Since 2005, the district has worked with the National School Reform Faculty to provide training to over 700 educators on critical friend protocols and processes. Instructional coaches, principals, and many teachers have been trained in the use of focused conversations and how to frame questions, and principals note that the use of protocols is moving into classrooms and impacting students.

Now equipped with the skills needed to engage in productive problem solving, the opportunity and time to do so, and a level of autonomy that permits the transfer of ideas into actions, teachers are becoming teacher leaders, principals are becoming stronger leaders, and the district has a pool of high quality leaders committed to continual improvement. There is an inherent tension between the top-down pressure to implement a district-wide reform effort and the desire to promote local school-based learning and problem solving. KCKPS has been able to negotiate this tension by fostering a mutually productive relationship between the district office and individual schools, articulated as defined autonomy, and by providing the time, space, and skills needed for educators to work together as active problem-solvers.

**Key Feature #3: Cultivating a Culture of Shared Responsibility and Accountability**

*We studied and got smarter together and built a community together; it wasn't about the what, because there was no "what." It was about collective responsibility. "What does collective responsibility look like in a structure?" If we are going to build collective responsibility, what do we need to do?*

Susan Englemann,  
Executive Director, Teaching for Learning

*Why did we have the Instructional Coach and the principal report to the district? Because we wanted to build collective responsibility for the results of that school between both the principal and the person responsible for the ongoing staff development at that school. We wanted to create a partnership between those two, and we wanted them to be able to talk professionally and as critical friends to each other when necessary, but also work in concert and in partnership with one another. We wanted to create a scenario where it was the two of them to work together to reach the goals together.*

Steve Gering,  
Former Deputy Superintendent

Shifting an organization's culture—the norms, behaviors, and ways of doing business that characterize an organization—is often seen as one of the most difficult aspects of district and school improvement. Indeed, it does take hard work, and it does take time. However, the story of KCKPS demonstrates that a large urban district can dramatically shift its culture and way of doing business and do so in a relatively short period of time. In the case of KCKPS, shifting culture involved ongoing strategic thinking, establishing and communicating a core message that was applied consistently across the entire district, and developing district-wide expectations, policies, and structures for monitoring and supporting school improvement efforts.

KCKPS set the foundation for the development of shared responsibility in its adoption of *First Things First* as a comprehensive and district-wide improvement effort. The critical features of *First Things First* reinforced and required that the district develop collective responsibility, but did not provide instructions for doing so. Exemplified in the quotation (above) by Susan Englemann, Executive Director, Teaching for Learning, it was up to the district to figure out what “collective responsibility look(s) like in a structure.” As described in this case, KCKPS developed a number of innovative structures and policies during the course of its improvement efforts which together contributed to the development of a district-wide culture of shared responsibility, accountability, and ongoing improvement.

- ◇ **Defined autonomy**, as it came to be called, articulated the relationship between the district and schools, defined a set of shared expectations for schools and students, gave schools control over staffing, scheduling, and finances, and reinforced the idea that the district and schools share the responsibility for what happens in schools and in classrooms.
- ◇ The creation of **smaller learning communities** within schools, combined with the use of **daily common planning time and early release Wednesdays**, provided school staff with the time to work together to improve their work.
- ◇ The incorporation of a **Family Advocacy System**<sup>19</sup> (an intensive version of the traditional advisory system) in each school fostered strong relationships among teachers and students.
- ◇ The development of **district-wide communication mechanisms and meetings** (e.g., leadership team meetings, cluster meetings) reinforced the idea that the entire district was working towards common goals and increased sharing of best practice across schools and between the school and district leaders.
- ◇ The **relationship between the IEDs, school-based instructional coaches, and principals** was intentionally designed to monitor and support school improvement efforts through the cultivation of school-level collective responsibility.
- ◇ **Ongoing and intensive use of data** (student data, school data, qualitative data) to inform the thinking and planning of schools and the district reinforced shared expectations for student performance.

**Mutual Accountability.** Within Kansas, public school districts and schools are required to develop multiple plans describing the actions that they will take and the resources that they will use to attain specific goals. Some planning

<sup>19</sup> Family advocates (which include all staff) have developed ongoing relationships with 15 students that involves daily contact with students, quarterly contact with parents, and face-to-face meetings with parents twice a year.

requirements are tied to federal and state resources and focus on compliance, while other planning documents and processes focus on improvement. What is notable about KCKPS' case is that federal and state planning requirements did not play much of a role in their overall improvement efforts. Mandated planning requirements were seen as paperwork and compliance oriented. However, this does not mean that KCKPS did not plan or set targeted goals for improvement. Instead, KCKPS developed what they called a "Mutual Accountability Plan" that included the Kauffman Foundation, IRRE, and the district. This plan was a living document that was revisited and revised on a regular basis. Reflecting on the plan, a district leader noted that "we would meet on a quarterly basis to revisit the plan, and sometimes we would look at a set of activities and say 'this is never going to get done and we didn't need it anyway,' and we would take it out. We would add items and activities on a regular basis. It was a living document. The money from Kauffman had strings attached, but they were strings that we created together."

#### **Key Feature #4: Focusing on Teaching for Learning**

*Instead of teaching and expecting students to learn, we teach for learning.*

Middle School Instructional Coach

*As we have throughout our reform work, the district will make sure all stakeholders have the opportunity to understand and contribute to the work of school and district improvement, and that all resources are organized to support schools in reaching their goals. We will continue to maintain our focus, protecting those things most directly related to instruction, in order to ensure that all students reach higher levels of success, and the achievement gap between groups of students disappears.*

Phase II Guiding Principles Document,  
January 2009

The literature on district and school improvement is filled with research and case studies that suggest that districts can improve student performance by focusing intensively on instruction, using data to drive instruction, and

building instructional coherence (Elmore, 1993; Sykes, et al., 2009). The story of KCKPS' rapid improvement does not run contrary to this base of research, but it does suggest that there is a different, and potentially more powerful and sustainable means of improving instruction. The early years of KCKPS' improvement focused on changing structures, in schools and across the district, building relationships through the use of the smaller learning community structures, and instilling a sense of collective responsibility among adults and students. KCKPS' starting point was "how can we improve our system to improve student outcomes" instead of "how can we change instruction." Creating new structures and improving relationships between and among adults and students provided the foundation for real and sustainable instructional improvement to occur.

Between 1997 and 2001, KCKPS' resources and energy were, understandably, focused on implementing the seven critical features (e.g., smaller learning communities, family advocacy, collective responsibility) in its middle and high schools, although elementary schools were also required to address the critical features. While organizational changes were being made in the middle and high schools, focusing in particular on developing smaller learning communities, elementary schools focused on improving literacy and reading instruction, and received professional development to support this work. Current Superintendent Jill Shackelford, who was Director of Curriculum until 2004, noted that "the elementary schools were allowed to, and could, focus on literacy because they already had a strong foundation of relationships—relationships with students—so they could focus on relationship building and literacy; while the high school teachers weren't nearly as good at relationship building and couldn't focus on both." KCKPS realized its first real gains in student performance in 2001, just as the third and fourth clusters of schools completed implementation of the seven critical features and the first cohort of students benefiting from the new literacy program entered 4th grade.



Once KCKPS had developed and refined its system-wide and school-level structures (e.g., the IEDs, instructional coaches, early release Wednesdays, smaller learning communities), the work on improving instruction became more focused and strategic. Instructional coaches now focus almost exclusively on modeling classroom instruction and analyzing data (with teachers and the principal) to explore areas of improvement. Looking at data means focusing on individual students and individual test items, linking indicators with standards, and using this information to ask questions (in smaller learning communities) about instructional practice. Principals and instructional coaches work together on a daily basis, looking at student data and deciding where to target coaching time, and they co-develop the agenda for the weekly Wednesday staff development time. IEDs work with principals and instructional coaches to set individualized goals for improvement and to analyze school and student data. Over the past three to four years, the district has developed internal data systems, assessments, and a data warehouse that provides schools and teachers with the ability to access data from multiple data systems, including student assessments. KCKPS is now utilizing its improvement infrastructure to focus intensively on improving instruction.

In 2005, the district, under the leadership of Superintendent Jill Shackelford, took a critical look at its work and success, and realized that while structures had changed and instruction was improving, they had yet to alter certain fundamental “beliefs” that many teachers, principals, and district officials held about students’ capacity to learn and achieve. Building upon the critical features of *First Things First* and their hard work of the past 10 years, the seven critical features were refined into the Four Strengthens: Strengthen Instruction, Strengthen Relationships, Strengthen Community Connections, and Strengthen Our Belief in Our Students and Ourselves. Two years later, in 2007, KCKPS charted its course towards changing beliefs and dramatically improving instruction across the entire district and for each and

every student by explicitly moving from teaching and expecting students to learn, to teaching for learning.

Since 2006, KCKPS has taken the following measures designed to improve instruction so that they can reach their goals of 75% proficiency in math and 85% proficiency in reading by 2010:

- ◇ Formed the position of Director of Equity to Close the Achievement Gap, responsible for leading the effort to close the achievement gap and working with district and school leaders to change beliefs.
- ◇ Formed the positions of Director, Teaching for Learning (Elementary and Secondary) responsible for enhancing curricular and instructional coherence across the district and working directly with the IEDs.
- ◇ Created the expectation that schools work as professional learning communities in order to better focus on differentiating instruction.
- ◇ Implemented full-day kindergarten across the district (Kansas only funds half-day kindergarten).
- ◇ Revised the focus on the district strategic plan to continue building upon *First Things First*, but with resources redirected towards the development of a guaranteed and viable curriculum.
- ◇ Implemented a Laptops for Learning program that provides individual laptops to all high school students and allows students to take the laptops home for individual use throughout the school year.
- ◇ Implemented a system of common assessments, or “benchmarking,” in which middle and high school students know exactly what they need to demonstrate to pass a course, articulated as a set of “I Can” statements aligned with standards. Student grades (A, B, C, and I) are based solely on attainment of benchmarks (e.g., teachers do not consider behavior, attendance, or other factors in assigning grades). Students receiving an Incomplete are given additional opportunities



to pass the benchmarks and turn the “I” into a grade.

KCKPS recognizes that they still have much work to do and that they face many obstacles as they strive to create a system that fully serves all students and adults. For instance, there is uncertainty regarding how much curriculum flexibility to provide to schools—balancing the desire to build instructional coherence while preserving the flexibility and autonomy of schools. There continues to be a concern around how to support and ensure the quality of the principal/instructional coach partnership that is key to improving instructional quality.

## Summary

The story of KCKPS’ improvement illustrates how a district can quickly mobilize to change its structures, systems of support, and approach to improvement, leading to real and sustainable changes in instructional practice and student outcomes. Perhaps just as important, KCKPS, through its work with *First Things First* and its ongoing desire to improve student outcomes, has become a learning organization that is driven to continue to improve so that all of its students have an opportunity to succeed.

### Triggering Rapid Improvement

KCKPS’ journey was triggered by the emergence of data that shined a spotlight on the deficiencies of the district and the ramifications of these deficiencies on students’ opportunity to succeed in life. Positioned with the urgency needed to change, the district was fortunate to be presented with the opportunity of funding and a framework for improvement provided by the Kauffman Foundation and the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, respectively. Seizing this opportunity, the district possessed the capacity to make a number of strategic decisions, in consultation with representatives from IRRE and from the Kauffman Foundation, that charted their course for the coming years. In

deciding that the reform was to be system-wide and taking a leadership role in communicating the importance of *First Things First* to the broader community, the school board ensured that the district would, at the very least, make a concerted effort to implement *First Things First*. With the hiring of Superintendent Ray Daniels as a trusted and well-respected leader, the district began its improvement effort in earnest.

### Becoming an Improvement-Oriented System

As documented in this case, KCKPS made a number of strategic, in many cases quite dramatic, changes to how the district office and schools were organized and how the district office monitored and supported school-based improvement efforts. These changes together served as the drivers for system-wide improvement. They reorganized the district office and aligned district resources and policies to support improvement efforts. Schools were given the opportunity, skills, and autonomy to engage in collective problem solving and figure out how to implement the seven critical features of *First Things First*. Altering district structures and providing schools with defined autonomy contributed to a reorientation of the district culture towards collective responsibility and improvement in which principals, teachers, and administrators were encouraged to take risks, identify issues, and propose solutions. As a result, KCKPS built leadership and instructional capacity in its schools and across the district.

## Supplemental Readings

Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools - Website: <http://www.kckps.org/ftf/>

### **Historical information and links to publications.**

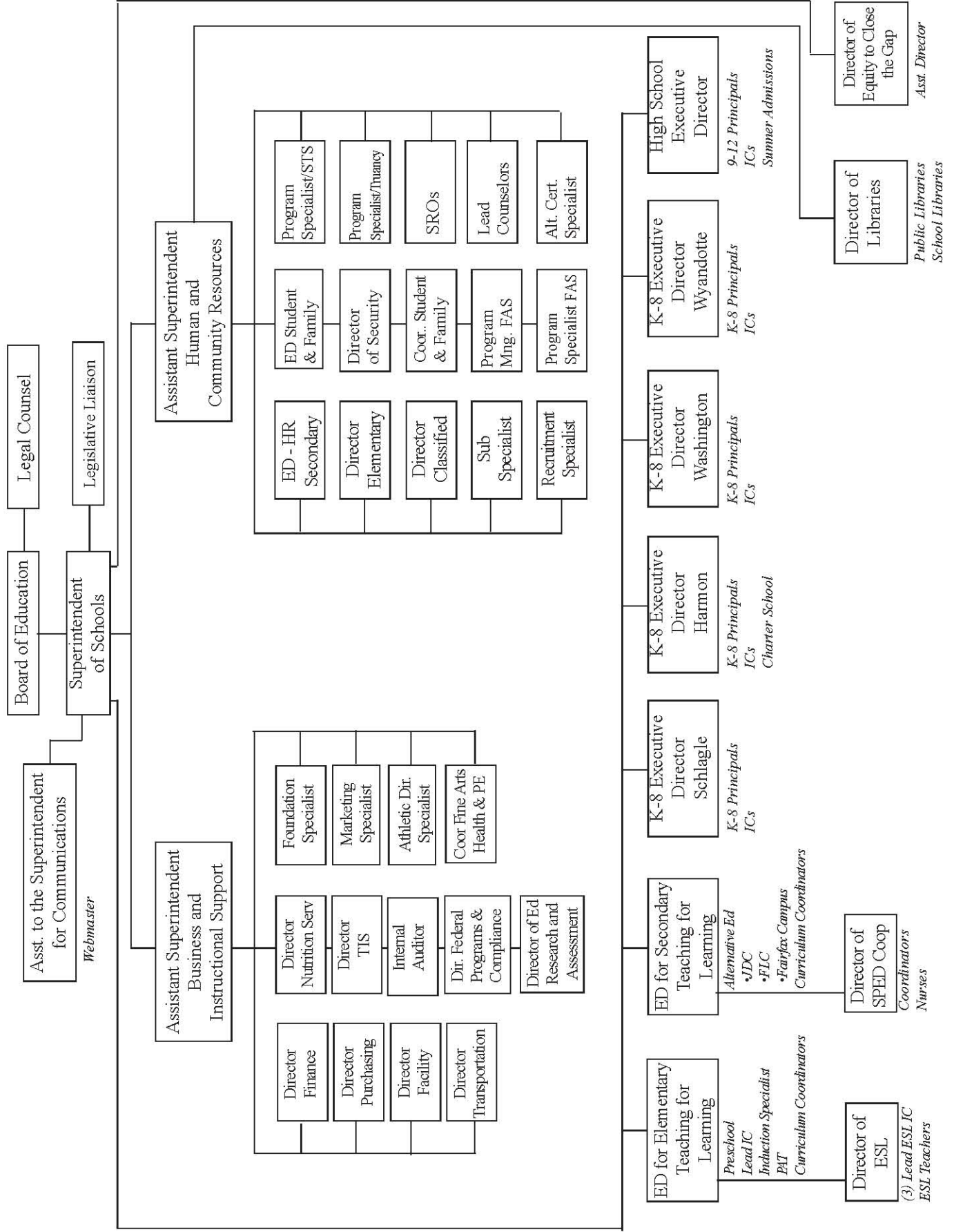
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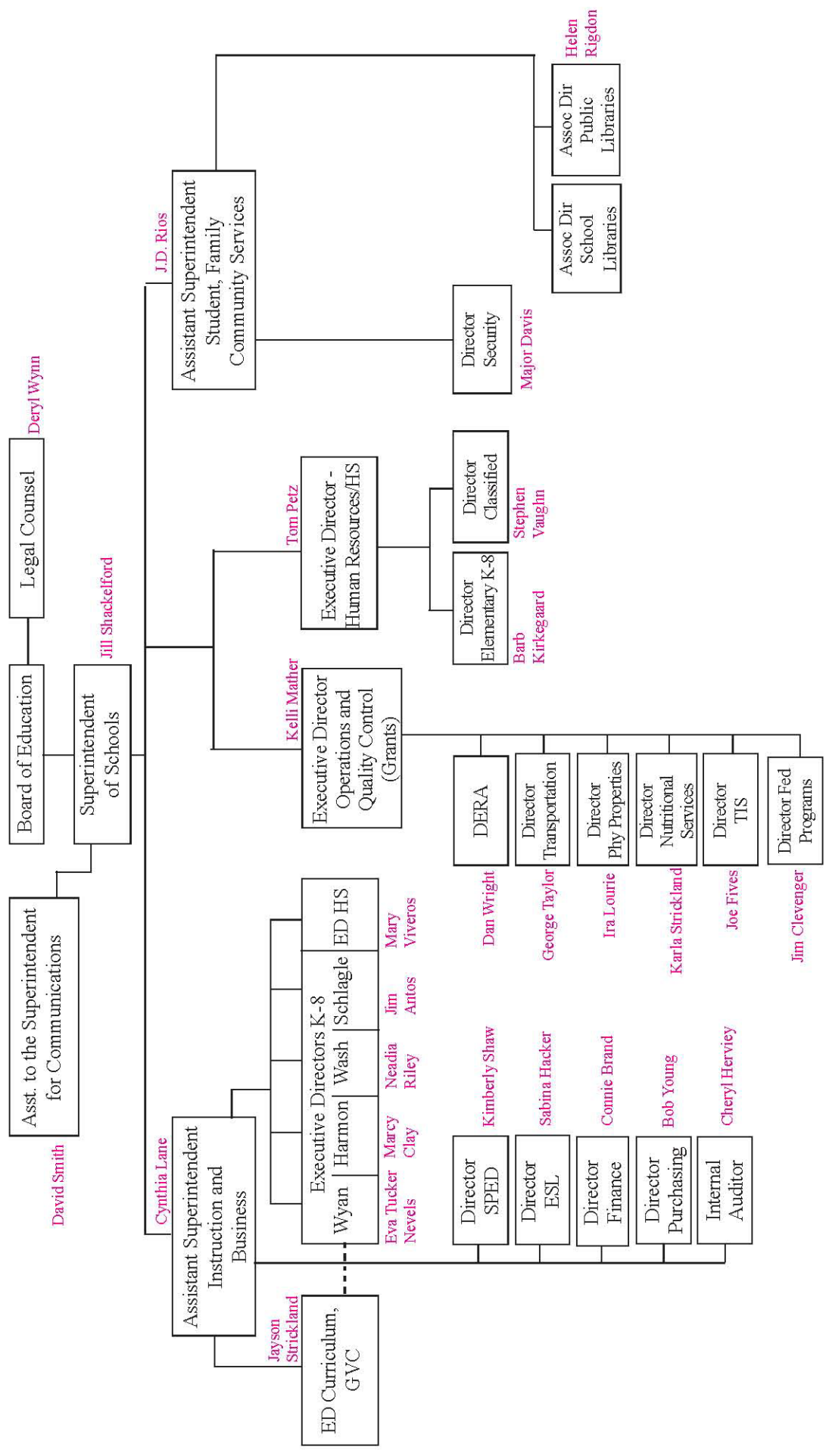
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# 2008 - 2009



# ORGANIZATIONAL CHART 2009 - 2010





## Burrton Public Schools: A Case Study of a Rapidly Improving District

### Introduction

Burrton Public Schools is a rural school district located in Burrton, Kansas, approximately 45 miles northwest of Wichita, Kansas. The community has a stable, working class economy based in crafts, furniture building, and the local oil fields. A small proportion of the student population is transient, consisting of foster children, primarily in the lower grades. The district has a small but growing population of students who speak a first language other than English. The district office and its two schools are housed in two connected buildings located in the center of the community. The student population ranges between 250 and 275, and the district employs 50 staff, including 28 certified teachers. The student population is predominately white (over 90%), with 50% of the students designated as economically disadvantaged. Over the past five years, students' academic performance has improved in math and reading, with the percentage of students proficient or above increasing from the 50 to 60% range (in 2004-05, for both reading and math) to 91.7% of students meeting standards in reading and 87.5% meeting standards in math in 2008-09.<sup>20</sup>

### The Context

At the close of the 2005-06 school year, Superintendent Drew Harris left after eight years as Superintendent of Burrton Public Schools to take a position as a district superintendent in a neighboring state. At the time, student achievement was not seen as a critical issue, as

<sup>20</sup> Assessing progress based solely on test scores for a district as small as Burrton, with only 15-20 students per grade, is not entirely accurate, as percentages can vary significantly from year to year. However, there is a strong and positive trending of performance data in math and reading over the past five years. In 2008-09, 91.7% of the district's students were proficient in reading, and 87.5% were proficient in math.

the district's performance on the state assessment was okay, but not great, and the school was making adequate yearly progress (AYP). However, the district did not have an aligned curriculum, and many teachers were frustrated that students often entered their classrooms at the beginning of the year without the expected or needed skills. Even in a small district where it might seem like teachers would be more inclined to work with each other across grades, teachers tended to work in isolation. Moreover, there was little incentive from district leaders or the community to question the status quo or to "rock the boat." There was little internal incentive to change the way that teachers taught or how administrators interacted with teachers.

With the departure of Superintendent Harris, Burrton's Board of Education encountered a number of challenges. Coupled with the departure of a second administrator, the Board was faced with the prospect of replacing two (of three total) district administrators. As the Board began the search process for a new superintendent, they were aware of some of the issues that the new superintendent would have to address, including the refinement of the district's curriculum and the need to stem the growing loss of school pride. At the time, Board members were not aware of the looming and very real challenges facing the district, including a significant budget shortfall, the fact that the district did not have a functional curriculum, and a lack of shared responsibility for learning among adults and students. The Board did not know fully what issues were facing the district, and it had no formal way to get this information.

### Evidence of Rapid Improvement

By the end of the 2008-09 school year and in only three short years, Burrton School District not only identified its many shortcomings, but also took real action to address these challenges. As a result of its improvement effort, teachers are improving instruction, focusing intensively on the use of data to improve instruction, and working with others to share instructional strategies. Student performance has increased each of the past three years, with the expectation that student performance will continue to improve. Faced with a significant budget crisis in 2006, the district made a number of wise financial decisions and was one of just a few districts across the state that was able to provide raises to its teachers in 2009, despite a statewide budget crisis. Since the beginning of its improvement effort in 2009, the district: (1) developed and implemented an aligned district-wide curriculum in mathematics, reading, and science; (2) researched, developed, and subsequently implemented an innovative K-2 multi-age primary program and an extended day program for grades 3-6; (3) instituted a data-based continuous improvement process that included systems for monitoring and supporting teacher instruction and tools for teachers to monitor the impact of their own instruction; and (4) fundamentally reoriented the district and school culture so that the entire school community shared responsibility for student learning and was focused intensively on how to improve instruction.

### Key Strategies Supporting Dramatic Improvement

**District leaders focused intensively on improving district systems and programs, which involved the identification and targeting of a set of core district needs and support from the Board of Education to do what was necessary to address these core needs.**

In the first two years of its improvement effort, the district developed and implemented targeted strategies that directly addressed identified needs, including:

- ◇ Development and implementation of an aligned curriculum in reading, mathematics, and science.
- ◇ Research and development of an innovative K-2 program that allowed for multi-grade grouping and instruction of students based on ability level rather than grade level.
- ◇ Research and development of an extended day program for struggling students in grades 3-6.

In order to develop strategies to address identified needs, **district leaders set non-negotiable expectations and objectives and then asked all teachers and staff to think about “how can we improve” to meet these objectives. Then, the district provided the autonomy and responsibility to teachers** to figure out how to improve (e.g., for researching programs, developing strategies, and aligning the curriculum) and meet defined expectations.

**District administrators refined their roles to more directly support and monitor classroom instruction** through the development of systems and processes (e.g., observation protocols) for teachers and administrators to analyze and monitor student data and classroom instruction.

District administrators and teachers co-developed specific tools and processes **for setting goals and objectives, tracking student data, linking student data to instructional strategies (Indicator Specific Instruction), and engaging in goal setting with students.**

*How did Burrton Public Schools embark upon the path leading to its rapid improvement?*

### Catalyzing Conditions for Rapid Improvement

In the spring of 2006, Burrton’s Board of Education was faced with the prospect of identifying and hiring a new superintendent, a task with which the Board had limited experience. At one level, the necessity of hiring a new superintendent marks the starting point of Burrton’s story, although the mere act of hiring a

Superintendent was not the catalyst for improvement. So what happened in Burrton that jump-started the improvement effort?

**Board of education training.** Burrton’s Board of Education understood the importance of hiring a high quality superintendent that could lead the district and be a strong member of the community. Seeking assistance, the Board requested and participated in training provided by the Kansas Association of School Boards. Burrton’s Board members spoke to the importance of the training, remarking that “we started to understand our role and the need to take a regular look at the inner workings of the district.” Some Board members expressed an emerging awareness that the Board’s relationship with the previous superintendent may not have been as effective as it could have been. With a better understanding of their own role with respect to district governance, the Board proceeded with its search for a new superintendent.

**Hiring of Superintendent Dale Herl.** The Board’s selection process came down to a decision between a promising young candidate (Dale Herl) with limited administrative experience and a second candidate with extensive experience as an administrator and superintendent. The Board decided to go with the applicant that was more change-oriented and seemed to be more inclined to have an active role in the local community. As a result, the Board selected Mr. Herl to be its new superintendent. Looking back upon this decision, Board members stated that this was the most critical decision that they made during the process, and that “it could not have worked out better,” although at the time of the hiring the Board did not realize the depth of change that needed to be made in the district. In addition to the hiring of Herl, the Board addressed the second administrative opening by bringing in Gene Haydock, an experienced educator who had also served as Mr. Herl’s mentor.

Soon after taking the helm of the Superintendency, Superintendent Herl became aware of a number of challenges that required immediate attention.

Most urgently, the district was faced with a budget shortfall of \$132,000, an issue that was compounded by inefficient and somewhat outdated policies and procedures for purchasing and procurement of services. In the area of teaching and learning, Superintendent Herl quickly realized that the district did not have a functioning curriculum, which meant that the district would need to develop and align the curriculum from top to bottom, not simply refine existing curriculum. In addition to those challenges related to the district’s core functions (e.g., finance, policies, and establishing a viable curriculum), there was evidence of declining student performance (especially in the lower grades) and an overall district culture that was focused more on maintaining the status quo rather than questioning and thinking about how to improve teaching and learning.

During regular school board meetings, Superintendent Herl presented, in stark terms, the state of the district with respect to its finances and curriculum (the lack thereof). The Board, while initially surprised at the information presented by Superintendent Herl, immediately began to work with Herl to address the financial concerns and approved funding to initiate work on curriculum development.

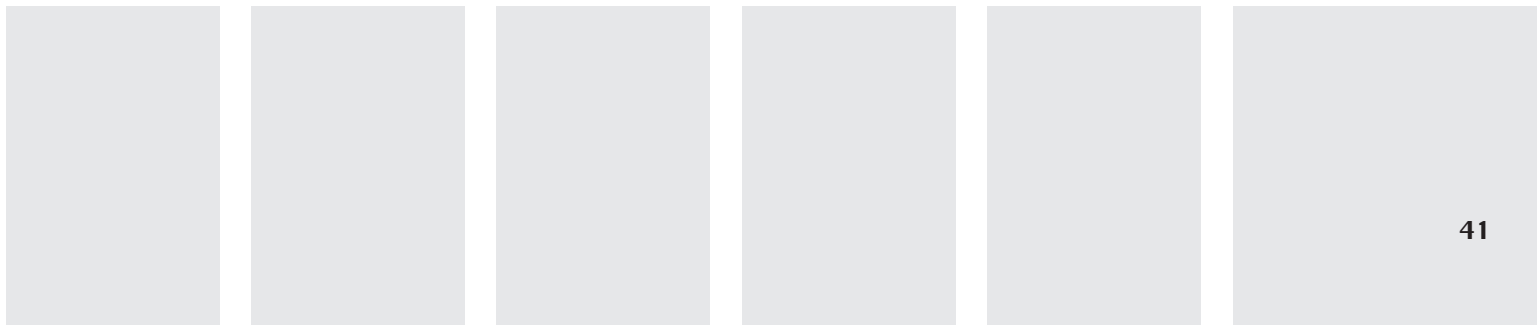
**Actions Supporting Rapid Improvement**

**Incentives**

Impending financial difficulty, combined with Superintendent Herl’s candid depiction of the state of the district’s curriculum and instruction, provided the impetus for the Board to fully support Superintendent Herl and to take an active leadership role in driving the district’s improvement efforts.

**Opportunity**

The hiring of a young, change-oriented Superintendent and an established and trusted principal opened up a window of opportunity



for the Board to support proposed improvement efforts. Superintendent Herl's ability to understand and then present, in a candid and problem solving manner, the critical issues facing the district provided the opportunity and the catalyst for the district's initial improvement efforts.

### Capacity

A minimal threshold of internal capacity was evidenced by school board members who understood the importance of selecting a change-oriented superintendent and were able to listen and positively respond to the information presented by Superintendent Herl once he took his position. The combination of a board that was willing to learn and change and the selection of a change-oriented superintendent met the threshold capacity needed to move forward with improvement efforts.

## Defining and Communicating a System-wide Improvement Effort

With the backing of the Board and a growing sense of urgency among the broader school community, district administrators moved quickly to address those issues needing immediate attention. Superintendent Herl focused first on securing the funds needed for the district to remain fiscally solvent, without having to lose key teachers or programs.<sup>21</sup> By treating the district like a business, Superintendent Herl identified those areas where costs seemed high or could be reduced and proceeded to reduce costs by renegotiating contracts, interest rates, and in some cases putting out new contracts for bid. Having addressed the immediate financial concerns, district administrators moved on to developing a K-12 curriculum, which they knew had to be in place if teachers were to be able to examine and improve instruction.

Starting in the fall of 2006, Superintendent Herl formed committees tasked with developing an

<sup>21</sup> For instance, great care was taken to preserve staffing for the district's valued music and band program, which was a source of pride to the district.

aligned K-12 curriculum in reading and math. Some teachers were initially resistant, but with the support of the majority of the teachers, the committee work moved forward. Superintendent Herl's message was clear—developing an aligned curriculum was critical if the district was going to be able to improve teaching, learning, and ultimately students' achievement. Within the committees, district administrators modeled the types of discussions and work processes that were expected, such as the setting of clear objectives and collaborative discussion, questioning, and problem solving among teachers. Principal Meyer recalled that “we stated the objectives as non-negotiable, but left the work up to the teachers.”

While not as formal as a set of guiding principles or a particular research-based model or approach to district improvement, Burrton's improvement effort, articulated first through the work on curriculum alignment, and later as they addressed low reading scores or worked to improve instruction, is clear and comprehensive. The message that guides all district actions, policies, and work, and is expressed by administrators, teachers, and the school board alike is: How are we going to improve learning?

### Moving Toward Rapid Improvement

By first hiring a young, change-oriented Superintendent and then being able to come to terms with the seriousness of the issues facing the district, Burrton's school board played a key role in charting Burrton's path towards rapid improvement. However, the role the school board played was more a matter of good fortune than the result of careful deliberation. The reality is that the Board (and the broader community) was somewhat complacent, and they admit that they did not know of the depth of the district's challenges when Superintendent Harris departed. Many communities are complacent, especially when test scores are not altogether poor, and kids seem to be learning. However, it is easy for complacency to develop into a culture of low expectations. The Board and the entire community is fortunate in that there was a level of



expertise and willingness within the district, a threshold of existing capacity among its teachers, who were ready to take risks and improve when given the opportunity. By inviting teachers to be part of the solution and to develop the curriculum, Superintendent Herl was able to activate teachers' capacity within the district.

## Becoming an Improvement-Oriented Learning Organization

*The neat part is that I know where my kids are. Before, if I had a group of 20 kids, I wouldn't really know where they were. I could guess, but I didn't really know. Now I know where my kids are, and I can do something about it.*

K-2 Primary Teacher

Since 2007, Burrton has implemented an impressive array of strategies and programs that, according to staff and supported by recent data, are meaningful and leading to changes in teachers' instruction and student learning. The rapid and initially successful implementation of such strategies, including curriculum alignment, the development of an innovative K-2 primary program, and the use of indicator specific instruction (all described in more detail later in this case study), does illustrate what is possible to accomplish in a few short years. However, it is not Burrton's impressive success in designing and implementing technical strategies<sup>22</sup> that is at the heart of Burrton's rapid improvement. In addition to implementing needed strategies and programs, Burrton has changed the culture of its district so that "the dynamic has changed" and the district is focused on improvement instead of the status quo, or as one teacher remarked, "our conversations are about improving rather than blaming."

There are two factors that contributed to, and explain how, Burrton has moved towards

<sup>22</sup> Technical strategies refer to strategies that address a technical issue that has a known solution, such as a lack of curriculum or student's inability to decode words, in contrast to adaptive issues that refer to an organization's capacity to learn to improve and develop solutions to multiple challenges, some of which have yet to be defined or understood.

becoming an improvement-oriented organization. First, district administrators, including Superintendent Herl, were diligent in communicating a consistent and powerful message that everyone was to be focused on improvement and setting goals for improvement. The impact of strong district leadership cannot be overemphasized. Second, the message of improvement was reinforced by deliberately granting teachers with the autonomy, responsibility, and opportunity to grapple with and solve those issues directly related to instruction and student achievement. Tightly linked with Burrton's intense focus on improvement was an understanding that teachers were crucial to the improvement process. Teachers and members of the school community must be co-constructors of solutions and actions—the "how to" of the improvement process.

Burrton's intense focus on improving teachers' instruction, student learning, and celebrating improvement is illustrated throughout the majority of the systems and policies developed and used to support its improvement efforts.

## Key Features of Burrton's Improvement Effort

### Key Feature #1: Reorganizing the District Office to Support Improvement Efforts

In larger districts, there is a clear demarcation between the "district office" and local school buildings. The distinction stems in part from physical location as well as historical differences in the role of the district office personnel in contrast to principals and teachers. It is relatively easy to picture how a large, urban district might restructure itself by altering staff roles and functions, moving some staff to schools, or placing more (or less) resources in a particular office. In a rural setting where the Superintendent and one or two additional administrators provide for all of the districts' administrative functions in addition to serving as a principal for

the elementary, middle, or high school, it is less clear how a district might restructure. The improvement efforts undertaken in Burrton provide an excellent example of what district (re) organizing to support teaching and learning looks like in a rural setting.

At the onset of the 2007-08 school year, Superintendent Herl and his fellow administrators, Gene Haydock and Principal Meyer, quickly realized that they needed to create a sense of collective responsibility and accountability among staff, something that had been missing up to that point. Unable to relinquish any of the formal duties held by district administrators (e.g., around finance, operations, monitoring) Burrton's administrators instead shifted their

actions, behavior, and discourse to focus intensively on continuous improvement. In doing so, district administrators reoriented the district—improving instruction and creating systems and processes for supporting ongoing improvement. The efforts of district administrators to dramatically improve district functions resulted in the development of an integrated set of data-based, improvement-oriented systems and processes that together have the effect of reorienting the organization and building leadership and instructional capacity. Burrton's administrators now take on multiple roles that, in a larger district, would be carried out by district staff, principals, coaches, and external facilitators working directly with schools.

### **Actions Supporting Rapid Improvement: Reorienting a (rural) District Office to support Teaching and Learning**

1. District administrators formalized increased collaboration and communication focused on improvement, which meant that district administrators (e.g., Superintendent Herl and Principal Meyer) met on a daily basis to discuss issues related to teachers, monitoring instruction, and student data, in addition to administrative issues (e.g., operations, busing, communication with parents and the community).
2. The superintendent encouraged teachers and the Board to visit other school districts and schools, looking for examples of best practice and innovative programs.
3. The superintendent shared the full extent of district and school performance data with the School Board, and worked with the Board to consider how district policy could be shifted to support improvement efforts.
4. District administrators supported goal setting with students, so all teachers set specific goals for improvement with each student.
5. District administrators created formal systems to monitor and support the ongoing learning and improvement of teachers and administrators. For instance, administrators developed an observation protocol (the Observation Snapshot) to visit classroom teachers on a daily basis, focused on providing structured feedback to teachers on instruction and classroom management.
6. Administrators and teachers co-developed and now use a data-based approach to continuous improvement and planning that involves:
  - i. Teachers compile and send student data (primarily formative) to district administrators weekly.
  - ii. District administrators aggregate classroom-level data to support analysis of student growth towards priority indicators.
  - iii. During regular staff development days, administrators and teachers work together to analyze student data, focusing on the identification of priority indicators that serve as the basis for ongoing analysis and improvement of instructional strategies.
  - iv. Teachers use “indicator specific instruction” to track students’ performance and growth towards the three high-priority indicators and use information provided by administrators to review and assess the effectiveness of instructional strategies.
  - v. Students not making progress towards indicators receive additional support through an extended day program.

## Key Feature #2: Supporting Collective Problem Solving

If the first ingredient to Burrton's improvement effort was reorienting administrator roles to focus on improvement and setting expectations around what needed to be improved, then the second ingredient was providing teachers with the autonomy to figure out how to meet those expectations. Whether by design or by circumstance, Burrton's administrators consistently supported collective problem solving by providing teachers and staff with meeting time and opportunities to discuss, brainstorm, ask questions, and develop solutions to those issues directly impacting student learning.

### Problem Solving Around Curriculum Design.

During the initial work around curriculum mapping, Superintendent Herl tasked the content committees with developing the K-12 curriculum in reading, math, and science. Within the committees, teachers were encouraged to engage in collaborative discussions and were provided technical assistance from the local education collaborative. Teachers involved in the curriculum development noted that it was during the committee work that the tone of the discussions began to change, and teachers became willing to share challenges that they were facing in the classroom. Teachers were now asking the question: "What can we get better at?"

### Developing the Burrton Primary Model: A Multi-age Continuous Learning Program.

In response to a growing need to improve the districts' stagnant, and in some years declining, reading scores in the lower grades, the K-2 teachers and the librarian spent a full year (2006-07) exploring, researching, and subsequently developing a customized multi-age primary model. District administrators provided the parameters for this work (e.g., to develop a K-2 program that would support student achievement in Burrton) and then provided teachers with the autonomy, time, and resources needed to develop an appropriate and locally based program. The K-2 teachers visited other local schools to observe programs and even invited

one district to come to Burrton to give a presentation to the staff and the school board. Ultimately, the K-2 teachers identified a program being used by a neighboring district and then spent considerable time customizing the program so that it would work in Burrton.

Burrton has been able to support collective problem solving throughout its improvement effort by:

1. Providing dedicated time and space to teachers (e.g., in committees or in staff development days) focused specifically on improving teaching and learning;
2. Communicating certain parameters and non-negotiable expectations while also providing teachers the autonomy to develop their own solutions; and
3. Modeling collaborative discussions and providing teachers with the tools needed to engage in productive and open discussions.

Overall, Burrton's improvement effort is characterized by the strategic use of dedicated time and space for teachers to problem solve and develop programs and solutions that directly address issues impacting student performance.

## Key Feature #3: Cultivating a Culture of Shared Responsibility and Accountability

*Before this work [curriculum mapping and using data to track student's progress] teachers were upset and frustrated that students were coming to their grade unprepared. Teachers used to ask: "Why are your students coming to my class unprepared?" Now, the dynamic of the conversation has changed, and teachers now ask other teachers, "What are my students weak on when they come to you?"*

High School English Teacher

*The illusion that being treated like a professional means being left alone to work in isolation is no longer true.*

Junior High Teacher

Prior to initiating its improvement efforts, the Burrton school district was characterized by a growing sense of apathy with respect to student performance. Most, if not all of the teachers in

the district did want to improve and understood the need for a consistent and vertically aligned curriculum; however, there was little district-wide incentive for individual teachers to take risks or to try to improve one's practice. It was safer for teachers to stay in their classroom and teach than to critically inspect their own practice and to ask if students were learning.

After three years of focused work and efforts to improve teaching and learning, there is a renewed, or perhaps a reawakened, sense of collective responsibility and school pride. The norms and beliefs of the district community, including teachers, administrators, community members, and the school board are now more sharply focused on improving instruction and increasing students' lifelong learning opportunities. The district's actions and consistent message, focused on improvement and improving all aspects of teaching and learning, has taken hold and become part of the beliefs, norms, and "way of doing business" across the district.

When asked to reflect on potential reasons for the change in district culture, teachers and administrators made the following observations:

- ◇ Aligning the curriculum and including all of the teachers in curriculum alignment helped to get teachers on the same page and working towards the same goal.
- ◇ Developing indicator specific instruction provides a common language and specific tools for teachers to use to improve instruction.
- ◇ Inviting teachers to problem-solve and develop solutions to pressing issues increased teachers' willingness to support initiatives and directives from administration.
- ◇ Administrators are in classrooms all the time and every day. All of the teachers know that they are being supported as well as being held accountable for good teaching in their classroom.
- ◇ Administrator modeling of professional and accountable actions (e.g., setting goals, visiting classrooms, administrator collaboration,

providing constructive feedback) reinforced productive discussions and risk-taking among staff.

- ◇ Board support for the K-2 Primary Program and other policies (e.g., the retention policy, remediation and after-school programs, the opening of a new charter school) reinforced the hard work and efforts of administrators and teachers.

### **Key Feature #4: Building Instructional Capacity**

*Before, we used to teach it, test it, and then move on. Now, we teach it, test it, track it through the data, review the gaps, re-teach it, and test it again.*

Math Teacher

The intensive effort to develop a district-wide aligned curriculum set the stage for the district to focus on instruction as a system. In the lower grades, the development of the Burrton K-2 primary program provided teachers with the data tools and instructional strategies needed to improve instruction. Building upon the success of the K-2 program, grades 3-6 incorporated the DIBELS formative assessment into their work, in addition to ongoing use of the Kansas Computerized Assessment (KCA) to assess student progress. Administrators encouraged the upper grade (7-12) math teachers to question how they could improve instruction, resulting in teachers carefully examining the relationship between their own instructional strategies and student progress. Reinforced by the monitoring and support provided by Superintendent Herl and Principal Meyer and through their use of classroom observation protocols and weekly monitoring of classroom data, the district moved to formalize "indicator specific instruction" across multiple grades in 2008.

In the fall of 2008, the district used its professional development in-service days to focus on school improvement and using data to drive instruction. In September, staff members were asked to identify all of the things that they (and the school as a whole) were good at and those issues that they felt needed to be improved. Then, the staff was asked to cross out all items



*The Burrton Primary Program is a multi-age continuous learning program in which students progress through the content based on their mastery of the standards, rather than according to grade-level or age. Students are housed in four multi-age homerooms and teachers use flexible grouping for reading and math, which allows teachers to provide targeted small group instruction to students. A key aspect of the program is the ability of the four teachers to meet together on a daily basis to look at student data and discuss how students are performing and behaving in different groups and subject areas, and to use this information to modify instruction.*

## Summary

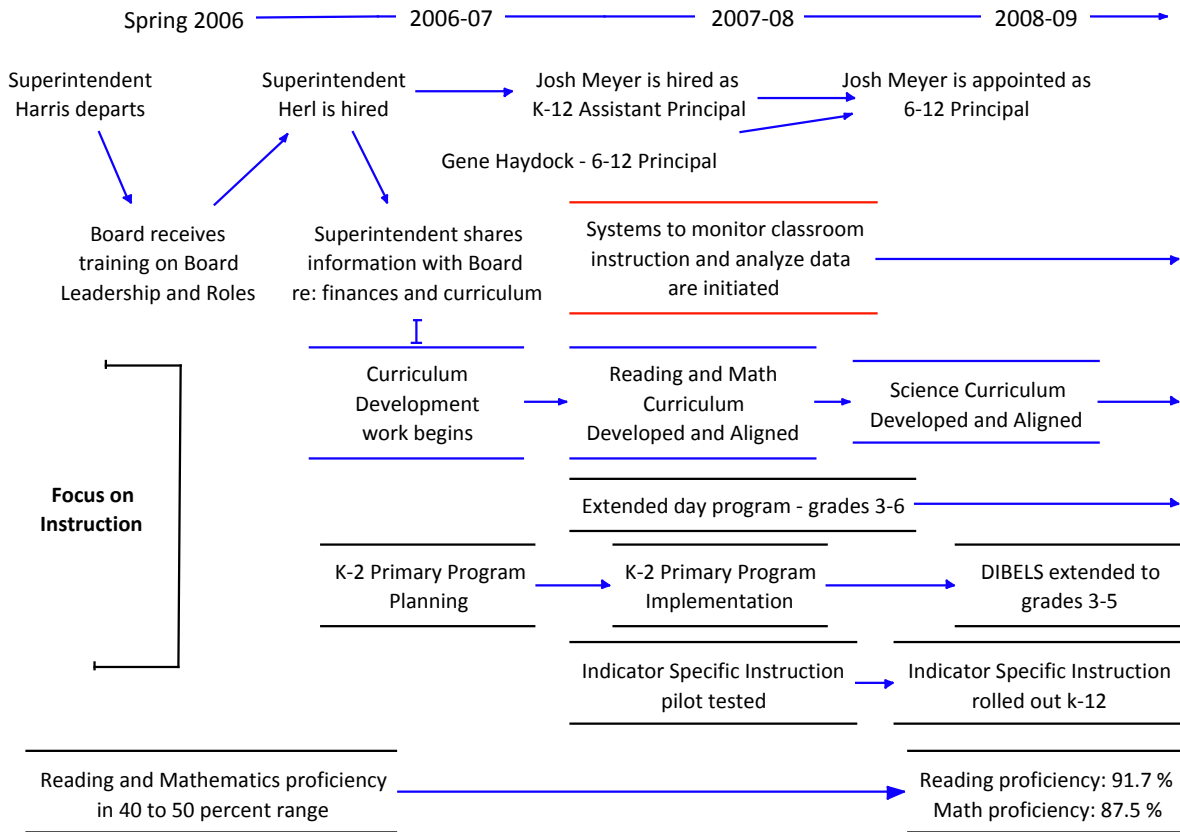
Burrton Public Schools engaged in rapid and district-wide transformation that led to considerable gains in student academic performance. Within a year of initiating improvement efforts, the district had addressed its financial issues and developed an aligned curriculum in reading. Given the situation that the district was faced with in 2006, with a loss of two of three administrators, a looming fiscal crisis, fragmented curriculum, and frustrated staff, the district's improvement effort is remarkable.

Undoubtedly, capable leadership played a large role in Burrton's transformation. As the case study illustrates, a key aspect of district leadership was the ability of the leaders to state, in no uncertain terms, what was expected of the district, teachers, and students. However, the takeaway from this case is not that key needs were identified and expectations set to address these needs. Rather, it was how the leadership and the district developed an improvement mentality that helped to build capacity as they went about improving their district. In those critical areas where teacher knowledge was most consequential and support most needed, district leadership granted (or one could say "required") that teachers do the work of figuring out solutions and then implementing these solutions. District leadership set the expectations and defined the need to develop an aligned curriculum, to create an effective K-2 program, and to link instruction with standards and student data, but it was the professional staff in the district that played a large role in developing and implementing strategies to meet these expectations.

and issues that didn't directly impact teaching and learning. Working from the focused list of items that related to teaching and learning, district administrators posed the question: What can you improve and get better at? In this way, district administrators reinforced the message of improvement and focused teachers on those items directly related to student learning.

Building upon this work, district administrators used the October 2008 in-service to begin to roll out indicator specific instruction across the entire school. Each teacher was given a packet of data for their own students, and asked to prioritize the three indicators that students have been struggling with over the past two years. Teachers set goals for student mastery of the identified indicators and assess on a weekly basis student progress towards these three indicators. Some teachers have begun to incorporate additional indicators into their weekly analysis and are intentionally modifying instructional strategies on a weekly basis.

**Timeline and Overview of Major Initiatives - Burrton Public Schools (2006 to 2009)**



## Discussion

### Implications for State and District Policies and Supports

What do these case studies and the accompanying *Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement* tell us about how states and districts can successfully initiate and support rapid and dramatic district improvement?

Over the past two decades, the standards movement and the drive to hold schools accountable for student performance have defined public education. The goal of the standards movement, as now written into law through federal and state accountability policies, is to improve educational outcomes for all students and to close the achievement gap. In theory, the standards movement provides the foundation for teaching and learning, defining what students should know and be able to do, and accountability policies provide the motivation and incentives for schools to improve. State education agencies have developed and implemented standards, designed assessments to measure progress towards the standards, and crafted policies to hold districts and schools accountable for making progress. And most recently, states have mobilized and created systems to support those districts and schools not meeting standards. School improvement has grown and matured along with the standards movement, and many districts and schools are doing a good, if not great, job

in supporting student learning. However, we know that for many districts and schools (and the students in these schools), the standards movement has not produced the desired gains in academic achievement. We are past the point of blaming any particular group of stakeholders for this lack of progress. What is clear is that catalyzing dramatic improvement in the lowest-performing districts and schools requires a new approach to accountability and a more precise way of thinking about how improvement is cultivated and sustained.

The cases presented in this report confirm what the emerging research on school turnaround efforts have found—that rapid improvement requires new models of accountability, a particular set of leadership skills, and a deeper understanding of the conditions (e.g., the incentives, opportunity, and capacity) necessary to catalyze dramatic and rapid improvement. We invite state education leaders, district and school leaders, policymakers, and the broader educational community to use the information in this report to consider our collective roles in promoting rapid district improvement.

*The Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement* can be used to:

- ◇ help states, districts, and policymakers better understand why certain districts improve and others fail to improve

- ◇ help states and districts measure districts' capacity for improvement
- ◇ inform the crafting of policies and incentives that will promote collective responsibility and mutual accountability within districts
- ◇ suggest state policies that would provide the flexibility, incentives, and opportunity for districts to engage in rapid improvement
- ◇ help states identify policies and strategies that could be used in a differentiated fashion depending on a district's needs (e.g., their place on the pathway to rapid improvement)
- ◇ help district leaders strategically design a pathway to rapid improvement—an implementation road map

We close this report with a set of key themes, posed as hypotheses, and a selection of questions for states and districts to consider in relation to each finding. While the hypotheses provide a research-based point of departure for states to reflect upon as they develop ways to support rapid district improvement, the hypotheses do not presuppose a “correct” answer. The answers to the questions we pose will likely be different from state to state, and even within state lines. It is in the figuring out of the answers to these questions that real, actionable, and meaningful solutions will emerge and ultimately lead to dramatic and sustained improvement in districts and schools.

**Hypothesis #1: Rapid improvement requires that districts simultaneously:** (a) set non-negotiable expectations that will require schools

to rethink how they are organized and how they teach, and (b) provide schools with the autonomy, flexibility, and skills needed to figure out how to meet the non-negotiable expectations.

Consider the scope of requirements, sanctions, and supports that run from your state education agency to districts and ask: To what extent do our state support efforts support or hinder district efforts to do the following?

- ◇ Reorganize the district office so that all resources and strategies are directed towards improving the district and its ability to improve student learning;
- ◇ Create a district-wide sense of collective responsibility and shared ownership for improving teacher and student learning;
- ◇ Create structures, opportunities, and incentives for schools and teachers to engage in collective problem-solving and to enact school-based improvement strategies; and
- ◇ Focus improvement efforts on improving instruction and improving relationships.

**Hypothesis #2: Rapid district improvement requires that the district engage in a system-wide improvement effort that requires rapid and dramatic change.**

- ◇ What are the policy changes that will provide districts and schools the flexibility needed to adopt and implement a system-wide improvement effort?



- ◇ How can states provide coherent and differentiated support to districts engaged in system-wide improvement efforts?

**Hypothesis #3: Rapidly improving districts direct all resources, personnel, and strategies towards improving the district as a system and improving teaching and learning; they are improvement-oriented.**

- ◇ How can states promote a culture of improvement within districts and among districts across the state?

**Hypothesis #4: A district that lacks the ability to carry out its core functions will not be able to engage in rapid improvement without significant support from an external partner.**

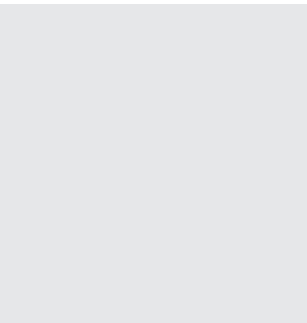
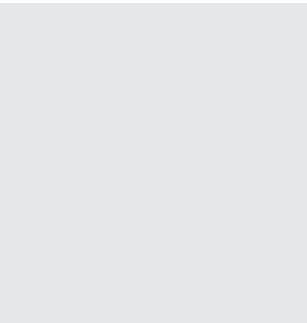
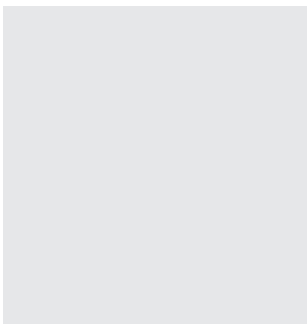
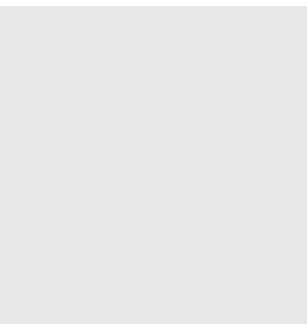
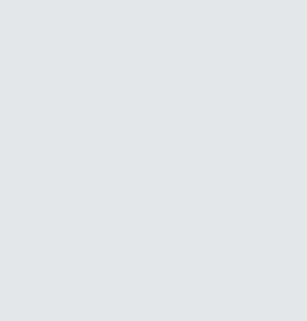
There is a minimal threshold of capacity needed both in terms of a district's core functions and its internal capacity to work together as a district.

- ◇ How can a state (or a district) assess and then decide whether or not an external partner is necessary to support the improvement effort?
- ◇ What would be the role of an external agent, or a lead partner, in supporting rapid district improvement?
- ◇ In addition to assessments and accountability measures, how can a state accurately assess the capacity of districts to engage in rapid improvement? What types of self-assessments or external assessments would be needed to measure a district's overall capacity to improve?

**Hypothesis #5: Current state and federal accountability policies are insufficient to trigger rapid district improvement.**

The case studies demonstrate that rapid improvement is often triggered by a particular set of circumstances and an element of risk-taking, typically on the part of a leader or change agent. The public disclosure of data and mandated planning requirements are insufficient to trigger rapid improvement.

- ◇ How could data be used or presented in ways that would demonstrate to district leaders the ramifications of low academic performance on students' lifelong chances for success?
- ◇ What is the incentive for a district or school board to admit that it is failing its students?
- ◇ How could change agents be strategically used or coordinated to create catalyzing events?
- ◇ How could the state enable catalyzing events to occur more frequently in targeted districts?



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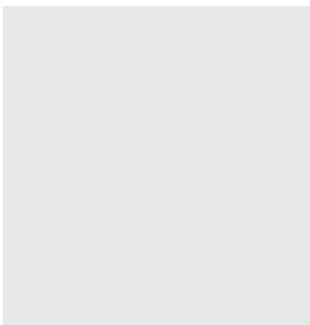
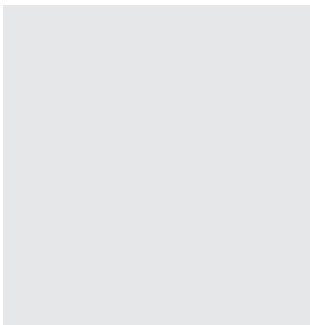
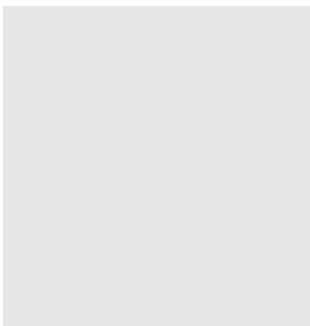
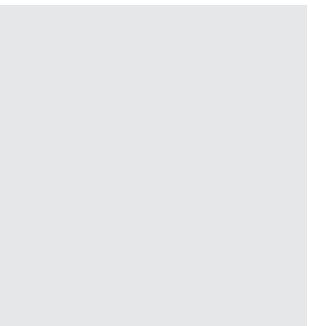
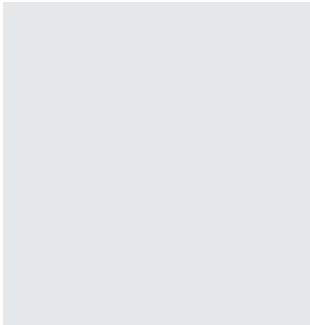
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## Case Methodology

The goals of the work contained in this report are to: (1) develop a research-based explanation of how districts are able to engage in rapid improvement, and (2) provide the foundation for the development of useful tools and resources that can support states and districts actively engaged in district improvement. In working to attain these goals, we developed and refined a conceptual framework for district improvement and capacity building through a detailed literature review and case studies of two improving districts. In order to better explain district improvement as a particular phenomenon, we employed an inductive case study design intended to generate theory, or in this instance contribute to a more refined conceptual framework that would allow for hypothesis generation and testing (Eisenhardt, 1989). The design is intentionally iterative and exploratory, using a preliminary framework for district improvement and capacity building to develop protocols and structure the analysis of case study data and subsequently using the case study findings to refine the framework.

## Research Questions and Framework Development

A preliminary framework for district improvement was developed as follows:

1. We analyzed current frameworks in use by the Center on Innovation & Improvement and by other researchers and organizations with experience in district improvement.
2. We reviewed the current research base on district improvement and leadership (including select case studies of district improvement), identified potential gaps in our framework, and refined the framework based on the research.
3. We developed a preliminary framework for district improvement that included the two core district functions and a third category focused exclusively on how districts improve.

Building upon the preliminary framework, we crafted two inquiry questions to inform the case studies of Burrton Public Schools and Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, both located in Kansas:

- ◇ How has the district (e.g., the Superintendent, central office staff and leadership, and the school board) promoted and supported improvement efforts?
- ◇ What are the key functions, systems, policies, and processes that districts develop and use to support dramatic and sustainable improvement efforts?

## Case Study Visits

4. We used the preliminary framework to develop site visit protocols, customized for each of the two sites.
5. **Case Selection:** The cases were selected as paradigmatic examples of a specific phenomenon—a district that had made dramatic and rapid improvement with respect to student academic achievement and real changes in district functions and culture. We selected from a single state to reduce variance based on state-to-state differences. We selected one rural site and one urban site to better understand the potential differences in district improvement based on size and locale.

**6. Site Visits and Data Gathering:** Prior to conducting the site visits, relevant documents (e.g., district improvement plans, past district and school report cards, pertinent research and publications) were reviewed. At each site, interviews and focus groups were held with the pre-identified key leaders and stakeholders (Table 1). The majority of interviews were recorded to supplement onsite note-taking. After each visit, site visit notes were cleaned and annotated using audio recordings.

Table 1. Overview of Case Study Data Collection

	<b>Kansas City</b>	<b>Burrton</b>
Days onsite	3 full days (February 2009)	2 full days (April 2009)
Interviews	1.0 to 1.5 hour interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Superintendent</li> <li>◆ Assistant to the Superintendent</li> <li>◆ Assistant Superintendents (n=2)</li> <li>◆ Director, Equity to Close the Achievement Gap</li> <li>◆ Former Superintendent (via phone)</li> <li>◆ Former Deputy Superintendent</li> <li>◆ President, Board of Education</li> <li>◆ President, NEA of Kansas City</li> <li>◆ Instructional Coach (High School)</li> </ul>	1.0 to 1.5 hour interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Superintendent</li> <li>◆ Principal (High School)</li> <li>◆ Teachers (n=6)</li> <li>◆ President, School Board</li> </ul>
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Executive Directors of Instruction (n=6)</li> <li>◆ Director of Federal Program and Director of Research and Evaluation (n=2)</li> <li>◆ Executive Directors, Teaching for Learning (n=2)</li> <li>◆ Principals (n=4)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ School Board</li> <li>◆ Community Members (n=10)</li> </ul>
School Visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Wyandotte High School</li> <li>◆ Sumner Academy of Arts and Sciences</li> <li>◆ Central Middle School</li> <li>◆ Eugene Ware Elementary School</li> </ul>	All three schools visited - Elementary, Middle, and High School located at same site.

### **Data Analysis and Framework Revision**

7. Transcribed and annotated notes were analyzed using the constructs contained in preliminary framework for district capacity building and improvement. An iterative process of data analysis and framework refinement was used to categorize data and refine framework constructs. Specifically, we read each set of notes, coded information according to the framework constructs and to specific indicators linked to each framework construct, and noted information and themes common to both cases that were missing in the framework.



8. Based on our analysis of the data presented in the two cases, we revised the framework to include the *Rapid Improvement Pathway*.

### **Final report**

9. The full case studies were written and organized according to the revised *Framework for District Improvement and Capacity Building* and the *Rapid Improvement Pathway*.

### **Cautions regarding generalizability**

10. As a case study, specific findings (e.g., specific strategies utilized by each district) cannot be confidently generalized to sites unlike the sites used in this study. In other words—just because a particular strategy worked in Burrton or in Kansas City doesn't mean it will work in another district. However, the *Framework for District Improvement and Capacity Building* provides a research-based explanation of rapid district improvement that can be used to inform subsequent research and action-oriented strategies to support district improvement.

## **Understanding Innovative Approaches to District Improvement Site Visit Overview and Questions**

### **Overview**

The Center on Innovation & Improvement, a national content center supported by the U.S. Department of Education, is developing a *Framework for District Improvement* intended to support state education agencies and local school districts. Using a research-based set of district improvement indicators as our starting point, we are visiting a select number of districts that have had success in catalyzing and supporting district-wide efforts to improve teaching and learning leading to increased student achievement in underperforming schools. Through our visit and documentation of your district's "story" we hope to understand better how innovative districts have been able to make dramatic and sustainable changes leading to improved student achievement.

Two overarching questions guide our inquiry:

1. How has the district (e.g., the Superintendent, central office staff and leadership, and the school board) promoted and supported improvement efforts?
2. What are the key functions, systems, policies, and processes that districts develop and use to support dramatic and sustainable improvement efforts?

We are meeting with a cross-section of district and school representatives, including members of the school board and the broader community, to capture the breadth and depth of the district's improvement efforts. The following is an overview of some of the questions that we have for you and your colleagues.

### **Understanding Your Story**

1. At the beginning of the district's improvement efforts, what were the core issues and challenges influencing the ability of the district (and its schools) to improve student achievement?
2. How were these issues/challenges addressed? Specifically:
  - ◇ Who initiated the improvement effort? Who was involved?
  - ◇ What were the key events/activities/actions?
3. As a result of your district's overall improvement efforts:
  - ◇ What new, revised, and innovative systems, processes, policies, or programs is your district using to support improvement efforts?

- ◇ How, if at all, did district and community-wide organizational norms, culture, and beliefs change over time?

### **Sustaining Your Success**

1. What is your district's vision and how is this vision communicated across the district and among stakeholders?
2. If a school is identified as needing additional assistance to support its students, how does your district identify and decide upon the appropriate types of supports (e.g., targeted interventions, professional development)?
3. How is data (school- and student-level data) used to inform improvement efforts?
4. How does your district monitor and support school improvement efforts, such as the implementation of school improvement plans?
5. Of the various systems and processes that your district uses to support improvement, which do you consider to be the most useful in supporting ongoing improvement? Why and how?
6. How does your district coordinate and align district-wide and targeted school improvement efforts?

SITE VISIT OVERVIEW - HANDOUT TO ALL INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

## **Understanding Innovative Approaches to District Improvement Site Visit Protocol**

### **Focus Group and Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a little about your role and what you do in the district (or school board, individual school, or community).
2. It is my understanding that your district has made significant improvement/gains over the past few years (provide examples). Check for understanding and clarification, as needed.
3. Let's go back a few years to the beginning of your district's improvement efforts (or a point that you feel the district started to move in the right direction). At this time, what did you and your colleagues see as the core issues and challenges influencing the ability of the district, and its schools, to improve student achievement?

Probe for root causes, including district, school, and community issues.

- ◇ At what level of the system?
- ◇ Related to district functions—operational, teaching and learning, improvement?
- ◇ Related to incentives, opportunities, or capacity building?

Confirm and/or summarize key issues, as identified.

4. How were these issues addressed?
  - ◇ Who initiated the improvement effort?
  - ◇ Who was involved
  - ◇ What were the key events/activities/actions?
5. What has happened as a result of your district's overall improvement efforts? Specifically, have there been changes in:
  - ◇ the systems and processes (e.g., leadership team, communication, planning, professional development, monitoring) that are used to support improvement efforts?

- ◇ policies, such as incentives or increased flexibility and autonomy intended to support school improvement efforts?
- ◇ how data is used and analyzed to identify strategies?
- ◇ the relationships within the district office and between the district and schools?
- ◇ district, school, and community culture, beliefs, expectations, or norms?
- ◇ teacher practice and instruction?

SITE VISIT PROTOCOL - USED DURING EACH INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP

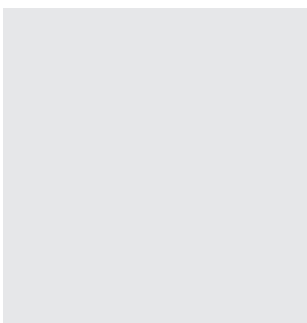
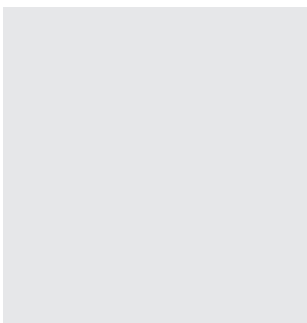
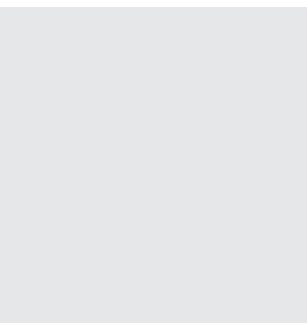
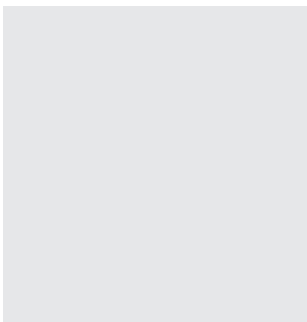
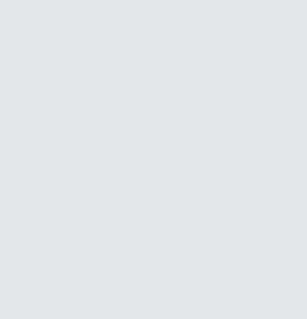
**Understanding Innovative Approaches to District Improvement  
Site Visit Protocol - Continued**

**Sustaining Success**

We have spent a good deal of time talking about the changes that have taken place here in the district and in schools as a result of the hard work of the past few years. Now I would like to turn to how your district and schools function in the present.

1. What is your district’s vision, and how is this vision communicated across the district and among stakeholders?
2. If a school is identified as needing additional assistance in supporting its students, how does your district identify and decide upon the appropriate types of supports (e.g., targeted interventions, professional development)?
3. How is data (school- and student-level data) used to inform improvement efforts?
4. How does your district monitor and support school improvement efforts, such as the implementation of school improvement plans?
5. How does your district coordinate and align district-wide and targeted school improvement efforts?
6. What types of policies does your district have in place to support innovation and improvement?
  - ◇ Incentives (positive and negative); financial incentives, autonomy
  - ◇ Increased flexibility for schools and teachers; waivers
  - ◇ Networking and capacity building strategies
7. Of the various systems and processes that your district uses to support improvement, which do you consider to be the most useful in supporting ongoing improvement? Why and how?

SITE VISIT PROTOCOL - USED DURING EACH INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP





## Rapid District Improvement Pathway

### Catalyzing Conditions for Rapid Improvement (Phase One)

1. A catalyzing event (or combination of events) that:
  - a. Heightens the awareness among school board and district leaders of critical academic issues and district deficiencies.
  - b. Increases the urgency among school board and district leaders to make significant changes.
  - c. Presents a window of opportunity (e.g., through changes to policies that create conditions for dramatic change, the availability of funding, access to expertise, external mandates)
2. Existence of a minimal threshold of capacity among the school board, district leaders, or principals. Examples of minimal capacity thresholds include:
  - a. Existence of a strong school board with a positive relationship with a district leader/superintendent from within the system.
  - b. Existence of strong principals and teacher leaders (but limited district leadership or board leadership)
  - c. Strong school board with the courage and ability to attract and hire high-quality leadership, including a Superintendent and other leaders who are change agents.

### Defining and Communicating a District-wide Improvement Effort (Phase Two)

3. Core district leaders and the board decide on a district-wide improvement effort that:
  - a. Is system-wide, in that the effort encompasses the entire district and all schools in the district;
  - b. Is linked to broadly defined needs but isn't necessarily a written strategic plan; and
  - c. Depicts a vision of the district that is dramatically different than the status quo and that will require administrators and teachers to do more than "tinker around the edges;" rather, it will require rapid, intense, and dramatic change.
4. Create an initial base of support—there is a process by which the full extent of the improvement effort (e.g., its focus, intensity, and that it will involve significant and rapid changes) is communicated and shared with principals, teachers, and key community leaders.

### Becoming an Improvement-Oriented Organization (Phase Three)

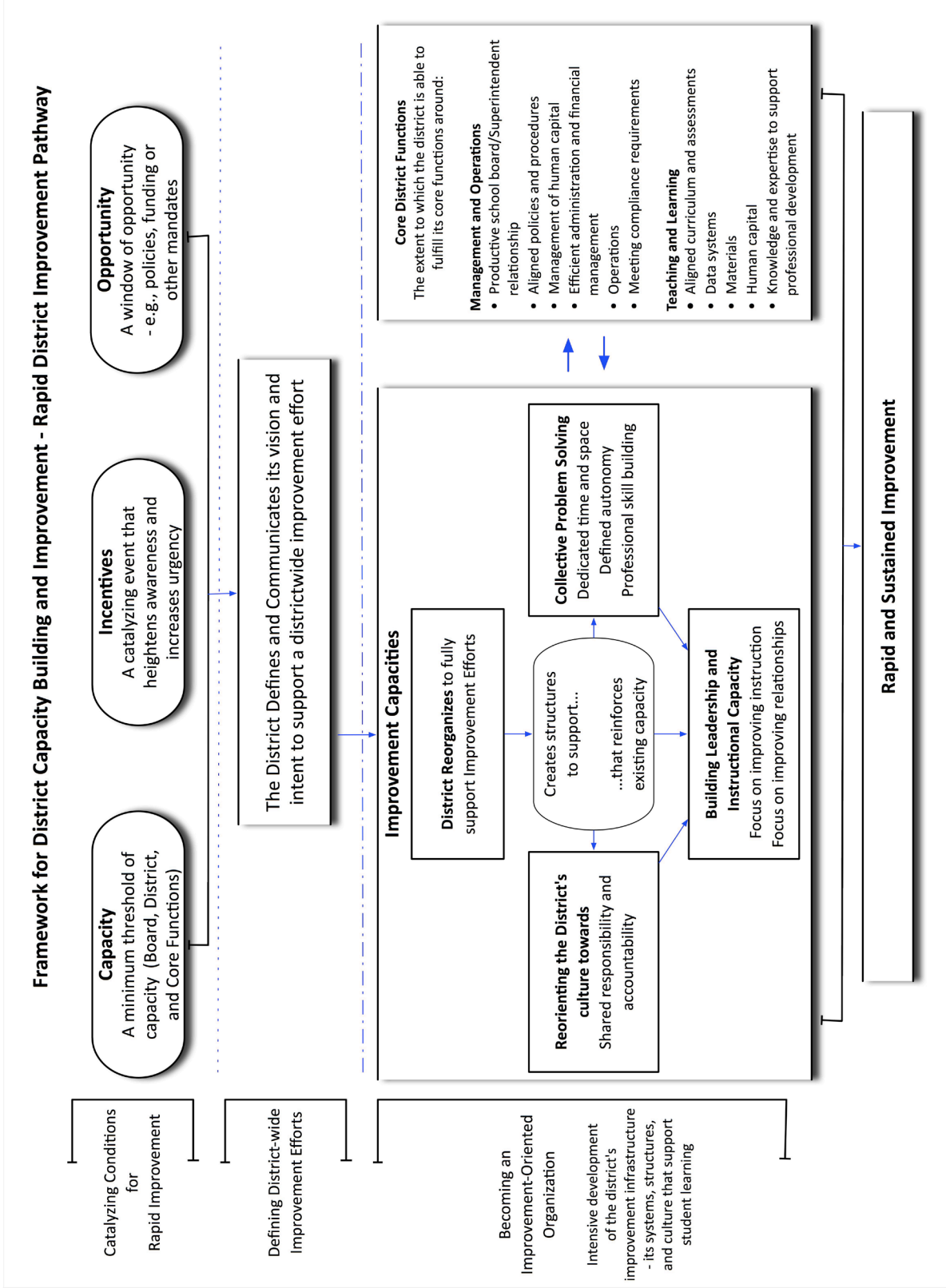
The District develops its improvement capacities by:

5. Restructuring the district office to support improvement efforts the district restructures so that all efforts, functions, policies, and actions are supporting the improvement effort.
6. Supporting collective problem solving through processes and strategies that:

- a. Provide dedicated time and space for educators to “figure out” local solutions—the “how to” (Opportunity)
  - b. Communicate and allow a strategic balance of district mandates/parameters and local autonomy (Incentives)
  - c. Provide professional development to educators on how to engage in ongoing problem solving (Capacity)
7. Reorienting the district culture and beliefs by:
- a. Developing an improvement orientation
  - b. Cultivating shared responsibility
8. Building leadership and instructional capacity
- a. Focus improvement efforts on improving instruction
  - b. Focus improvement efforts on improving relations among adults and among adults and students

# Appendix C

## Framework for District Capacity Building and Improvement Matrix of Framework Elements, Variables, and Indicators



<b>Core District Functions and Catalyzing Conditions Necessary to Embark on the Pathway of Rapid Improvement</b>	
<p><b>Management and Operations</b></p> <p>Core District Function</p> <p><i>The district demonstrates the following functions:</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Effective and mutually supportive relationship between the school board and the Superintendent/District.</li> <li>◆ Ability to develop, communicate, and enforce <b>policies and procedures</b>.</li> <li>◆ <b>Strategic management of human resources</b> - efficient and streamlined processes (e.g., systems for induction, evaluation, compensation, and training for all staff) focused explicitly on supporting Teaching and Learning.</li> <li>◆ <b>Administration and Finance</b> - efficient and streamlined processes for managing district finances, including an explicit connection to Teaching and Learning.</li> <li>◆ <b>Operations</b> - efficient upkeep of district buildings and operations (e.g., physical plant, food services, custodial, health, and student services).</li> <li>◆ Ability to meet <b>federal and state regulations and compliance requirements</b>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teaching and Learning</b></p> <p>Core District Function</p> <p><i>The district establishes, supports, provides, or has access to:</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>An aligned curriculum</b> that includes K-12 curriculum frameworks, maps, or guides and sample instructional strategies aligned with state standards and/or grade level expectations.</li> <li>◆ <b>District-wide and school-level formative and summative assessments</b> in literacy, mathematics, and science, providing for aligned assessments within and across grades.</li> <li>◆ <b>Data systems</b> for collecting, storing, accessing, and disseminating school and student-level data.</li> <li>◆ <b>Materials</b>, including textbooks and curricular materials, as needed for instruction.</li> <li>◆ <b>Human capital</b>, which entails that the district has the capacity to recruit, induct, evaluate, retain and/or release district and school staff, principals, teachers, aides, coaches, and support staff, including specialized instructional support.</li> <li>◆ <b>Knowledge and expertise</b> needed to support and train district and school staff on instructional programs, including designated time and opportunity for professional development.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Improvement Pathway</b></p> <p><b>Phase #1:</b></p> <p><b>Catalyzing Conditions for Rapid Improvement</b></p> <p><i>The current state of affairs is unacceptable and must change!</i></p>	<p><b>A catalyzing event or external change agent</b> that: (The initial <b>Incentives and Opportunity</b>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Heightens the <b>awareness</b>, among school board and district leaders, of critical academic gaps</li> <li>b. Increases the <b>urgency</b>, among school board and district leaders, to make significant changes</li> <li>c. Presents a <b>window of opportunity</b> (e.g., changes to policies that create conditions for real change, availability of funding, access to expertise, mandate, willingness to change)</li> </ol> <p>Existence of a <b>Minimal Threshold of Capacity</b> among the Board, District Leaders, or Principals (<b>Capacity</b>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Strong school board or a home-grown district leader/superintendent</li> <li>b. Strong principals and teacher leaders (but limited district leadership or board leadership)</li> <li>c. Strong school board with the courage and ability to attract and hire high quality, change-oriented leadership.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Improvement Pathway</b></p> <p><b>Phase #2:</b></p> <p><b>Defining and Communicating a District-wide Improvement Effort</b></p> <p><i>Here is what we are going to do; it will require dramatic change; and here is our vision!</i></p>	<p>Core District Leaders and the Board decide on a district-wide improvement effort that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Is <b>system-wide</b>, in that the effort encompasses the entire district and all schools in the district;</li> <li>b. Is <b>linked to broadly defined needs</b> (but isn't necessarily a strategic plan or initially tied to specific indicators); and</li> <li>c. <b>Depicts a vision of the district</b> that is dramatically different than the status quo and that will require administrators and teachers to do more than "tinker around the edges"; <b>it will require rapid, intense and dramatic change</b>.</li> </ol> <p>Create an initial base of support - There is a process by which:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The Improvement Effort (its focus, intensity, and that it will involve significant and rapid changes) is <b>communicated and shared with principals, teachers, and community leaders</b>.</li> </ol>



<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Improvement Pathway Phase #3: Becoming an Improvement-Oriented Organization</b> <i>The District develops its improvement capacities by:</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Improvement Capacity The Leadership Capacity of a District to Engage in Rapid and Sustained Improvement</b> <i>The district has explicit structures, processes, and programs for:</i></p>
<p><b>Reorienting the Organization</b> and shifting culture and beliefs by:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Developing an Improvement Orientation Cultivating Shared Responsibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>Establishing and communicating a district-wide improvement strategy</b>, including a vision and specific goals for improvement.</li> <li>◆ <b>Developing and communicating policies</b>, mandates, and new programs.</li> <li>◆ Establishing and maintaining a <b>focus on equity</b>.</li> <li>◆ <b>Coordinating and monitoring district-wide improvement strategies</b>.</li> <li>◆ <b>Setting expectations for, monitoring, and supporting school improvement efforts</b>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Supporting Collective Problem Solving</b> through processes and a strategic mix of strategies that:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Provide dedicated time and space for educators to “figure out” local solutions; the “how to” (<b>Opportunity</b>)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Allow for and communicate a strategic balance of district mandates/parameters and local autonomy (<b>Incentives</b>)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Provide professional development to educators on how to engage in ongoing problem solving (<b>Skills and Capacity</b>)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>Educators</b> (principals, teachers, administrators) to engage in ongoing (e.g., at least once a week) <b>problem-solving</b> around issues related to teaching and learning. (Opportunity)</li> <li>◆ <b>Incorporating educator-developed strategies and solutions</b> into school and district improvement efforts. (Incentives and Autonomy)</li> <li>◆ <b>Supporting and engendering productive attitudes/dispositions</b>, such as trust, willingness to share information, reflection and self-awareness, and willingness to change. (Skills and capacity)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Building Leadership and Instructional Capacity</b> by:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Focusing improvement efforts on improving instruction</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Focusing improvement efforts on improving relations among adults and among adults and students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>Improving instructional capacity</b> in schools and among district leaders.</li> <li>◆ <b>Analyzing and using data</b> to identify district and school areas for improvement.</li> <li>◆ <b>Investigating, identifying, and selecting improvement strategies (e.g., grants, programs, new initiatives)</b> that support and align with the district’s improvement efforts.</li> <li>◆ <b>Evaluating</b> the impact of programs and improvement strategies</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reorganizing the District Office to Support Improvement Efforts</b> by:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Restructuring the district office so that all efforts, functions, policies and actions are supporting the improvement effort</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <b>Strategically allocating and targeting</b> human and fiscal resources.</li> <li>◆ <b>Aligning district systems and structures</b> to support district and school improvement efforts.</li> <li>◆ <b>Aligning policies</b> to support district and school improvement efforts.</li> </ul>

BRETT LANE is a lead consultant and founding member of INSTLL LLC, an education consulting firm. His work involves supporting state education agencies and districts on a wide range of research, consultative, and policy-oriented education initiatives. Prior to forming his consultancy, Mr. Lane worked for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon and The Education Alliance at Brown University, as well as serving as an independent consultant for a number of state education agencies and with Learner-Centered Initiatives, located in New York City. Mr. Lane's areas of expertise include district and school improvement, state and district turnaround strategies, strategic planning, state accountability systems, high school reform, and charter schools. He is also a Technical Advisor for the Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII).

His current work involves researching effective state and district improvement efforts and providing consultative support to state officials and district leaders focused on the development of innovative and sustainable systems of support for underperforming districts and schools. Most recently, Mr. Lane led the development and field testing of district reviews and strategic planning tools for supporting linguistically and ethnically diverse districts identified for corrective action in New Jersey, Florida, and New Hampshire. Mr. Lane has an interdisciplinary academic background emphasizing the relationships among law, policy, and the broader community and social issues influencing public education.

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