

Cultivating Coherence:
Frames and Strategies for Integrating
Multiple District Reform Efforts

Race To The Top
Human Resource Pilot Project

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The alignment and integration of various initiatives is a key component of any comprehensive district reform effort. However, although this idea may be ubiquitous in the educational change literature, concrete examples of how schools, districts, and regions have gone about the work of integration are more difficult to find.

As existing systemic change projects in North America mature, more data and specific best practices on the integration of various initiatives will likely become available. In the meantime, several local, national, and international examples and the theories provided by today's most prominent educational change researchers may provide us with a sense of the conditions that will be most conducive to integration. This report summarizes several strategies drawn from current research that may help school districts to consider the integration of multiple internal reforms, as well as the integration of internal reforms and external initiatives.

Context

The authors of this paper are involved in the Human Resource Pilot Project, a four-year effort conducted in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The Human Resource Pilot Project supports three urban districts as they align and integrate components of their human resource pipeline in order to maximize efficiency and enhance student learning. The Human Resource Pilot Project has several purposes:

- To strengthen and optimize each of the seven levers on teaching expertise: Recruitment, Hiring, and Placement; Comprehensive Induction; Professional Development; Supervision and Evaluation; Teacher Leadership; Organizational Structure; and Adult Professional Culture.
- To infuse appropriate parts of the High-Expertise Teaching (HET) knowledge base into the operation of each lever (see below).
- To align the levers with each other, promoting integration without repetition or overlap.
- To ensure that lever plans are integrated with other improvement commitments or efforts in the district and state.
- To adhere to key principles of successful, sustainable change throughout the process.

What distinguishes the “Integration” design of the Human Resource Pilot Project, and what seems missing as the anchor of sustainable improvement in other approaches, is *what* is integrated across the personnel processes of the school system. Here, what gets integrated is a clear and comprehensive image of good teaching that goes far beyond the abstractions of large rubrics.

There is wide recognition that the individual classroom teacher is the key variable in

student learning and achievement. Thus, quality teaching and learning in the classroom have moved, appropriately, to the center of the reform agenda. Still, there is little understanding that teaching is one of the most complex human endeavors imaginable, and that the knowledge and skills for high-expertise teaching are as sophisticated and as wide-ranging as those for high-functioning practitioners in architecture, law, or engineering.

The research that supports this validated knowledge base for successful teaching is wide, deep, and a century in the making. It is summarized and highlighted every few years and entirely consistent across the syntheses of Bellon and Bellon (1992), Hattie (2012), Marzano (2001), and Saphier (2008).

In this project, we lay out in considerable detail the knowledge base for successful teaching in all its complexity. The purpose of the project, however, is not just to put a big map of professional knowledge on the table. It is to give teachers systematic access to that body of knowledge and skill and provide the accountability, the support, and the working environment for all teachers to be constantly learning and using more of it, no matter how competent and experienced they already are. Nothing will do more to raise student achievement than that.

Thus, “integration” of the seven levers of influence on teaching expertise means more than alignment and prevention of overlap and redundancy; it means deliberate and playful inclusion of common and specific images of what high-expertise teaching looks and sounds like at a drill down, detail level.

A Framework for Achieving Coherence

The piecemeal nature of most educational reform is so deeply ingrained as to necessitate a fresh vision of what educational coherence might look like. Our thinking about this new view is congruent with many in the field these days. For example, Childress et al. (2007) devised the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework to help educational leaders conceptualize the interlocking nature of various components of their work. At the center of the PELP framework is the *instructional core*. This includes teachers’ knowledge and skill, students’ engagement in their own learning, and academically challenging content. All initiatives that a district undertakes must be understood in relation to the instructional core. Surrounding the instructional core is a layer that Childress et al. call *strategy*—in other words, the set of actions a district undertakes to strengthen the instructional core and to make teaching and learning more effective.

1. The PELP framework suggests that organizational coherence at the district, school, and classroom levels will make a district’s chosen approach more effective and sustainable. The framers identify six aspects of the organization that must be brought into coherence with the strategy and with each other: culture, structure, systems, resources, stakeholder relationships, and environment.

- **Culture** refers to the norms and behaviors in an organization; in other words, “how things work around here.” While culture is often a difficult aspect of a district to define, measure, and change, a culture that is aligned with and supportive of reform efforts will increase the chances of a successful reform.
- **Structure** has to do with how people are organized, who has responsibility and accountability for results, and who makes the final decisions.
- **Systems** are the means by which work flows through the structure. Examples provided by the authors include career development and promotion, compensation, student assignment, resource allocation, organizational learning, and measurement.
- **Resources** include money, people, time, technology, and data.
- **Stakeholder relationships** are also necessary in achieving coherence. Effective strategies must be informed by the views and priorities of stakeholder groups, even though they disagree- leaders must persuade a majority of groups about the wisdom of their strategy or build sufficient alliance among key groups.
- **Environment** is an element over which district leaders have little direct control. However, they must manage environmental effects, including the local, state, and national policy climate.

The elements of the PELP coherence framework are common to all school districts, but the specific ways in which they will come together are necessarily unique and context-dependent. There are no “one size fits all” district change plans; rather, any plan must spring from a deep understanding of the context in which it will be implemented. Perspective is important in understanding the workings of a complex system. As Senge (2012) puts it, “most of us spend the bulk of our work time enmeshed in the ‘dance’ of day-to-day urgencies and tasks,” but truly effective leaders “step away from the dance and observe the patterns and dynamics as if from above” (p. 73). This kind of perspective may be gained through inquiry into practice among trusted colleagues willing to challenge each other’s thinking.

2. The ability to coherently describe a whole system is one of the capabilities that Senge (2012) identifies as essential for teams involved in large-scale change. The discipline of systems thinking allows team members to view problems and goals “not as isolated events but as components of larger but less visible structures that affect each other. To understand a system is to understand those interrelationships and how they recur and change over time” (p. 124). Systems thinking helps schools and districts understand their interrelated components, and also aids in the development of alternatives to the current way of doing business in the district.

3. While Senge takes differences among districts into account, other recent research has considered the differences within districts that affect attempts to integrate various initiatives. Anderson et al. (2012) studied districts in the process of standardizing and centralizing expectations, and encountered many examples of differentiated district-level supports for schools. Two findings stand out for districts engaged in the process of building coherence. The

first is that the clearer the expectations of district leaders, the more likely those leaders are to recognize the variations among schools, enabling them to provide the appropriate support. The second finding of interest is that externally mandated support can only go so far in meeting the varied needs of schools within a district—organizational learning through systemic inquiry is vital to true differentiation.

From the Central Office perspective, it is important that each building leader works within the culture of the district. In the Revere Public Schools we believe in and encourage building autonomy. But without the district goals and cultural norms understood and accepted by a building leader, a district culture would be hard to develop and sustain. Thus, much time is taken to share the cultural norms and overarching goals of the district with building leaders through regular meetings, and with the staff by regular communication of those concepts through the use of technology including e-mail, twitter, and a district Superintendent’s Blog.

Creating the Conditions for Integration

Besides describing the areas of school life that must be integrated, the PELP model defines the following four categories of integration mechanisms:

- **Organizational learning** ensures that staff members at all levels improve their knowledge and skills.
- **Strategic operating functions** include managing and analyzing student performance data, resource allocation systems, and use of human resources.
- **Accountability** should be the common expectation for performance.
- **Policy** such as common curriculum, parameters for managing student discipline, standards for community engagement, and human resource policies are an explicit method of creating coherence across schools.

Creating integration in the areas of school life can be done from the global perspective with mission and values statements that are widely understood and practiced. For example, in Revere we have non-negotiable values that establish the conditions for integration. First is an established moral imperative of doing “What is Best for Kids.” This imperative, which functions as both a declarative and interrogative statement, guides decisions, especially in times of conflict, and around it we have developed a cohesive message and mission. It’s amazing how some decisions become clear when stacked against it.

Second, we hold a district-wide belief in the 3 R’s—Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships—that is also non-negotiable. These 3 R’s guide the overall culture of the district and help to create conditions for integration across all of the work that we do. The shared belief in Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships is a foundation that guides adult professional culture, work with students, and communication with parents.

In addition to these mechanisms, structural and cultural changes can increase districts' ability to maximize the connections between various reform efforts.

Infrastructure. Given the complexity of the systems involved in school reform, any reform designs must take into account multiple actors, motives, and embedded contexts. Senge (2012) writes of the importance of innovations in infrastructure, advocating for the redesign of organizational practices and channels of communication.

Channels of communication and information sharing are of particular importance here, since communication across the various embedded systems must be clear in order for the multiple initiatives in a school or district to be translated anew as a coherent whole. Successful reformers go out of their way to identify the networks that already exist in their district, build upon the strong ones and strengthen the weaker ones, and find ways to facilitate communication among those networks. For example, technological advances have expanded the school district's capability to communicate and share information among a large number of people. In the Revere Public Schools, the technology network is designed to support the exchange of information for both teachers and administrators. Using e-mail, shared folders, and web pages, one can access information from any point, add to the resources, or just increase their own knowledge of what others are working with. As resources grow on the network, staff members see the complexity of their colleagues' work, and often improve their own performance as a result.

In the Revere Public Schools, consistent communication was a key factor in creating a culture that supported the integration of the seven pilot project levers. The central office delivered a clear, consistent message about the interconnectedness of the seven processes. This message was embraced by the steering committee and trickled down to those involved in the pilot project at all levels. Assistant Superintendent Dianne Kelly now reports that she has heard people who are not involved in the project use the language of integration, asking how a particular initiative overlaps with the work being done by various lever committees.

In addition to a consistent central message, structural changes can increase both the flow and the quality of communication. Reeves (2009) identifies five types of networks that may be observed in school reform efforts.

- In *contrived networks*, leaders create "working groups" which essentially repackaging existing communication patterns as "networks" (e.g., virtual meeting time). The good intentions behind such networks do not necessarily translate into strong or lasting results.
- *Spontaneous networks* are informal networks where people communicate in a simple and direct manner to those who most need the information. Without "bureaucratic filters," information travels freely and quickly. In the Revere Public Schools, administrators can share thoughts after a quick classroom walk-through by adding a comment in a teacher's dialog box on the district's network. Of course, this can also be done in person, but the use of technology allows for a record of the exchange and the opportunity for the teacher

to enhance the observer's comments with his or her own thoughts. This sharing leads to further development of concepts and deepens the understanding of curriculum content and pedagogy for the evaluator and the observed teacher alike.

- When spontaneous networks are formalized, they become *co-opted networks*. For example, an urban school system may want to harness the power of an existing informal network for reform purposes. In this way, they can combine the voluntary spirit of the original network with the full weight of the organization's informational and technological resources. The central purpose is to focus participants' time on sharing effective practice; whereas, in the spontaneous network, technological issues might have been a concern, now the individuals sharing practices need no longer spend their time fulfilling a support role. For example, teachers have always participated in information exchange, supplementing face-to-face discussions with the sharing of files, dialog boxes, or the monitoring of twitter and blogs. With appropriate guidance, administrators can encourage a critical mass of teachers to take advantage of the connectivity offered by technology, and can provide support for information exchanges to take place, both online and in person.
- In *nurtured networks*, leaders create the freedom and space for individuals and groups to create their own networks. In Revere, some four years ago, the Superintendent approached a school that was underachieving in the hope that the staff would see themselves as the most important constituents in the turn-around project. He spent time schooling the staff about the state's new Innovation School project, suggesting it as a possible path but empowering them to take ownership of their own school and learning. Such widespread ownership could only happen if the staff believed that their autonomy would be supported by the School Committee and Central Office. After a number of meetings with the Superintendent about the Innovation School model, the staff voted to begin the process of becoming the first Massachusetts Innovation School. They became a unified network of learners who increased their own learning by shared decision making and tapping the resources offered by the Central Office and other partners. In turn the building moved from a school testing at the bottom of the district to the top scoring elementary school with all state test scores at or above the state average. This was accomplished by developing a nurtured network by setting common goals, developing a culture and networking both in and outside of their building.
- Finally, in *value-driven networks*, purpose is the greater good; it transcends more temporal concerns like financial objectives, test scores, or quarterly goals. The moral imperative (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) behind a value-driven network makes it sustainable.

Reeves' categories are an interesting frame for reflection by districts. Are teachers spending their time in largely unsustainable contrived networks? Are there spontaneous networks which could become part of the district's reform effort? What type(s) of networks would lead to the most significant change?

In Revere's experience, teacher-driven networks have been particularly successful. Teachers reflect on their practice and share with others, thanks to the development of a culture that supports the exchange of ideas in a non-threatening manner. As time is carved out for grade level or job-alike meetings and norms of behavior are shared for such meetings, the staff starts to see their own productivity increase. Learning from each other becomes commonplace as teachers share, develop and discuss lessons, look at data on a continual basis, and adopt the philosophy that it's okay to assess their own performance and change what they are doing. These networks go far in changing classroom practice without the regular inspection often felt through a formal evaluation process.

In order to create the structure necessary for meaningful integration of initiatives, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) call for the integration of existing networks. Integrating networks is one of the "Four Catalysts of Coherence" identified in *The Fourth Way*. Hargreaves and Shirley note the intentional quality of successful integration: "In natural and social systems, the most effective networks combine properties of emergence (the innovations that arise in open systems through spontaneous and unpredictable cross-pollination and interactions) with the properties of design (shaping the interactions so that cross-breeding moves in a desired direction)" (2009, p. 99). Too much emergence—in other words, allowing networks to operate naturally—can lead to diffuse networks, unclear purposes, minimal impact, or the representation of volunteers and enthusiasts only (which contributes to the divide between those who are involved in the work and those who are not). On the other hand, too much design can be a problem, as this forces new ideas and innovations to fit within mandated policies. As the authors bluntly put it, "attempts to control networks ultimately kill them" (2009, p. 99). District and building leaders need to ask more questions. Rather than the traditional model of delivering ideas to their staff, leaders need to invite teachers into the thought process with provoking questions such that the teachers know they are part of the development of new ideas and programs. This establishes common goals and utilizes the expertise of the classroom experiences of teachers, giving more credibility to the idea. In this way the networking has developed a community of learners around a shared vision. Just as our students need time to construct their learning through lecture, research, hands-on experience, group discussion and debate, so do teachers. We need to dedicate more common time for these informal network exchanges to develop.

Hargreaves and Shirley explain that a successful coupling of emergence and design will have the following characteristics:

- Clear, common, and urgent purpose linked to learning, achievement, and improvement
- Participation is invited rather than compulsory or permissive
- Governments or foundations initiate and fund, but do not interfere
- Experiential knowledge is circulated among respected practitioners and invigorated by external ideas and expertise

Among the challenges of building strong networks is the pervasive political emphasis on short-term achievement targets. In addition, the authors note the mismatch between their model and today's ideologies of competition. Under the competitive model, schools have no incentive to share resources, ideas, or expertise with each other.

While these authors discuss the utility of working within existing network structures, districts that wish to achieve organizational coherence must also have the courage to radically re-imagine their structures. District structures are often built in response to external reform efforts. While these reforms come and go, the positions often stay even if they are no longer the most efficient way of conducting business. For a truly coherent system, structures must sometimes be reinvented. For example, authors such as Kotter (2012) and Barber (2009) advocate for a guiding coalition—a “small, well-qualified courageous group,” as Barber puts it, that oversees the sequencing and implementation of reform. Kotter describes the process of building a guiding coalition as identifying the right people, building trust, and identifying a common goal. Because not all outcomes can be anticipated, it is important that responsible parties are able to learn as they move forward. The guiding coalition must also build “ever-widening circles of leadership.” Although the coalition can stay at the center, it must consciously and constantly build leadership capacity through the service for which it is responsible. Revere has worked to meet this challenge through the creation of multiple, interconnected teams. For example, members of the guiding coalition, whom we call the Steering Committee, act as liaisons to the seven lever committees involved in the Human Resource Pilot Project. In this way, communication easily travels between the guiding coalition and a wider group of district staff members: lever committees' viewpoints are represented at Steering Committee meetings, and can directly inform lever committee members about new district-level decisions and issues.

A Culture of Stakeholder Empowerment. Mulford (2010) identifies various competing contextual pressures on schools, among them the pressure of individualism and/or community. If teachers believe that an administrator has co-opted top-down system change initiatives, teachers will feel alienated and disempowered. The same presumably applies to relationships at other levels of the systems (e.g. school administrators and superintendents). People wish to feel part of a group effort, yet they do not want to feel as though they are pawns in someone else's game.

The Revere public school district has approached this tension in a productive way through its work with the Human Resource Pilot Project. Central office administrators and other steering committee members had the opportunity to hear updates from the seven lever sub-committees with some frequency. While each sub-committee was focused on its particular process, the steering committee had a broad perspective on the work of all seven groups. Noticing a number of potential connections between the work of different sub-committees, the steering committee took a very active role in identifying connections among levers. For example, the Supervision and Evaluation Committee reported to the Steering Committee that they needed a mechanism to bring new teachers on-board to the Evaluation System. The Steering Committee

made a connection to a similar observation previously made by the Induction Committee, thus setting the agenda for a suggested joint meeting between the two groups to develop a solution.

Another example: The Recruitment, Hiring, and Placement (RHP) Committee felt that it would be a good idea to develop a survey to gain input from first year teachers to refine their hiring practices. The Steering Committee saw the opportunity to connect them to the Induction committee (IC), which was also thinking of developing a survey. The connection made by the Steering Committee resulted in a joint meeting between the RHP and the IC groups to develop one streamlined survey addressing both needs.

The Steering Committee feels that the best way to make use of their “big-picture” vantage point is to create an opportunity for focused dialogue between sub-committees that appear to be working on similar issues. In order to facilitate this dialogue, paired sub-committees met in a round-robin format, and were encouraged to discuss topics or themes identified by the steering committee. However, the specifics of the plans and the value of further collaboration were decided by the sub-committees themselves. Revere’s solution to the “silo” problem that sometimes plagues simultaneous reform efforts requires direct action on the part of the centralized decision-making body. However, stakeholders at other levels of the system will be asked to use their deep knowledge of their particular reform categories in generating a whole-district action plan.

Conclusion

The successes of districts like Revere suggest that districts have the power to interrupt the status quo—an endless series of piecemeal, short-lived reforms—in favor of a coherent approach that has a positive impact on teacher satisfaction and student learning. The establishment and maintenance of a strong instructional core, structures that support continuous learning, and a culture in which stakeholder knowledge is valued are all elements of a successful integration effort. They are the building blocks for a school system in which all adults are working toward a single goal: to increase opportunities for students.¹

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