DISTRICT CHANGE:
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND BEST PRACTICES

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Research surrounding systemic educational reform has highlighted several necessary practices for successful district-wide change. National education experts have identified the following strategies as highly effective for districts pursuing large-scale reform.

A Shared Mission

Developing a mission statement that depicts a shared vision is the first step in the process of systemic reform. Shared by staff and community members (Hord and Sommers, 2008), the common vision should inspire, compel, and motivate stakeholders to work towards change through collaboration (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Senge's (2006) concept of the *learning organization* explains the process of forming a shared vision. Learning organizations, which encourage people to continually expand their pattern of thinking and learning, develop shared visions by compiling the personal vision of each individual within the organization (Senge, 2006). Through continuous collaboration and conversation, a shared vision is developed and helps to keep the learning process constant through times of organizational stress.

In addition to a shared vision, researchers emphasize, a mission statement that is centered on quality instruction must exist. The instruction-focused mission should enhance the three components of the instructional core: teachers, students, and content (Childress, Elmore, and Grossman, 2005). Prioritizing a common commitment to student achievement and stressing the importance of providing students with engaging instruction and activities throughout the school day (Wagner, 2008; Schlechty, 2009) are two areas that should be aligned to mission-driven goals.

Vision to Action: Strategy

Following the creation of a shared vision and mission statement, a strategic plan to enact the vision must be designed (Childress et al., 2005). The strategic plan is a set of actions, with corresponding benchmarks to measure progress, that will accomplish an organization's collective purpose. When designing the strategy, districts should decide which aspects of the strategy should be consistent across the district, and which can be differentiated for individual schools. Beginning with strengthening the instructional core, the strategy should link available resources to actions and be kept under consideration when future decisions are made (Childress et al., 2005).

Successful design of a strategic plan, however, does not ensure successful implementation. Childress et al. (2005) describe five organizational elements critical to successful implementation of a district's strategic plan:

- **Culture** refers to the norms and behaviors in the organization and a shared understanding of basic operations and procedures members abide by. Organizational leaders are responsible for developing and molding the culture, as well as creating 'buy-in' among their colleagues and staff.
- **Structure** reflects how the work of the district is done and how people within the district are organized. The structure outlines each member's responsibilities and holds individuals accountable for their actions/ non-actions.
- **Systems** refer to the formal and informal processes and procedures through which work is done. Examples of systems include career development and promotion ladders, compensation guidelines, student assignment, resource allocation strategies, organizational learning opportunities, and accountability methods.
- **Resources** are the tools available for a district to implement their strategic plan. The organization uses resources such as people, money, and technology to encourage leadership, think creatively and cost-effectively, and respond to external accountability demands.
- **Stakeholders** are internal and external groups and individuals that have a legitimate interest in the success of the organization. This group has the ability to influence the organization's mission, as well as the design and implementation of an organization's strategic plan. Stakeholders may include: teachers' unions, parents, students, school boards, community and advocacy groups, local politicians, and policymakers.

Organizational Coherence

Organizational coherence, alignment of all actions to the mission statement and clarity about the strategic plan, is necessary for successful district-wide change (Fullan, 2006; Childress et al., 2007). Coherence ensures that all actions, resources, and structures are aimed toward accomplishing the common organizational goal. Recognizing the importance of context, however, coherence allows for differentiation between schools in order to adapt to individual school needs and characteristics (Childress et. al). The Coherence Framework, modeled by Childress et al (2007), claims that coherence can be achieved by taking four key actions:

- Connecting the instructional core with the district-wide strategic plan for improvement.
- Highlighting district elements that can support or hinder effective implementation.
- Identifying interdependencies among district elements.
- Recognizing forces in the environment that have an impact on the implementation of the strategic plan.

For districts taking these actions, Childress et al. (2007) stress the importance of differentiation and integration. Differentiation and integration complement one another in the process of maintaining coherence while acknowledging variations in context. Differentiation is an inside-out process where districts learn about individual schools' needs. Integration, on the other hand, allows schools and districts to share best practices in efforts to improve systemically. Childress et al. (2005) list four categories of integration mechanisms that should be consistent throughout the district:

- *Accountability* should be the common expectation for performance.
- *Organizational learning* refers to steps taken to ensure that staff members at all levels improve their knowledge and skills.
- *Strategic operating functions* include managing and analyzing performance data, resource allocation systems, and use of human resources.
- *Policy*, such as common curriculum, parameters for managing student discipline, and standards for community engagement, should remain consistent.

Capacity Building

A district's capacity comprises the skills and knowledge of educators and the resources (time, money, human capital) allocated to individual schools. Building district capacity is the primary tool to achieve long-term systemic change. Developing new knowledge, skills and competencies, allocating resources strategically, and investing in agencies that can deliver new capacities (e.g. instructional coaches, mentors, etc.), will contribute to building capacity and eventually producing sustainable improvement (Fullan, 2006).

To further contribute to capacity-building, districts should design a comprehensive set of strategies that can be used by people to learn from one another. Important for converting knowledge and information into action, professional learning communities can be one strategy that will build a district's capacity and increase the intrinsic motivation of individuals to improve their organization (Fullan, 2006). Hord and Sommers' book, *Leading*

Professional Learning Communities (2008), provides a detailed description of the elements necessary for a successful Professional Learning Community (PLC):

- Staff share beliefs, values, and vision. Community constructs a shared vision of improvements that they will work towards. Visions and beliefs are based on unrelenting attention to students' learning and academic success.
- Shared and supportive leadership and sharing of power and authority. PLCs must be democratic and distribute leadership. A culture of collegiality can be seen in discussion of practice, sharing craft knowledge, observation of practice, motivating colleagues to achieve personal success.
- Staff learning occurs collectively and individuals are able to apply their learning. Conversations are focused around instruction and student learning based on performance data.
- Supportive conditions and staff collaboration are used to build trust among colleagues.
- Shared personal practice is a norm. Colleagues provide one another with constructive feedback and review each other's practices.

Relating to school districts, the central office bears the greatest responsibility of capacity building (Schlechty, 2009). By providing ongoing support to educators and schools, fostering innovation and flexibility, making technology more accessible, and encouraging district-wide collaboration, central offices provide the solid foundation the district needs to implement and sustain change. Central offices also make "lateral capacity building" possible (Fullan, 2006). By acting as the central communicator for all district schools, the central office breaks down the barriers between individual schools and creates a cross-district network of professional educators (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

Along with PLCs, capacity building is also built on data usage. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) stress that district and school data regarding student achievement and teacher performance should be used to inform the professional learning, but not to make judgments or isolate educators. Data should contribute to the ongoing learning occurring during district and school professional development sessions, in addition to being collected and disaggregated for a more detailed understanding of the needs of various groups of students (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

Peter Senge's (2006) concept of the *learning organization* aims to build organizational capacity. A learning organization, one that is continually expanding its ability to use information to shape its future, promotes capacity through its belief in three key disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, and team learning. A learning organization fosters personal mastery by creating a climate where each individual is encouraged to learn and grow personally. People feel safe to take risks and challenge the status quo. Collectively, these disciplines institutionalize practice and learning by challenging and expanding thinking. Ultimately, they develop the skills of reflection and inquiry, which in turn build an organization's ability to learn from past mistakes and improve future operations.

In addition to proper use of data and efficient PLCs, capacity building should also focus on creating effective leaders. The researchers agree that for leadership to be effective, it must be spread throughout the organization. Effective leaders entrust other individuals in the organization to adopt greater responsibilities and build their leadership abilities on an ongoing basis. In the district setting, the principal is viewed as the leader who gives energy and empowers his/her workforce (Schlechty, 2009). The district should build a coalition of leaders that are charged with creating and driving a clear and coherent strategic plan (Fullan, 2006).

Strong leadership is required for the sustainability of a reform effort. Lacking effective and efficient leaders, efforts towards long-term systemic change will likely be unsuccessful and remain unable to properly execute the strategic plan.

Leadership During Change
Senge (2006) describes leaders as designers, teachers and stewards. Leaders help other people see the current reality and challenges being faced by an organization. During times of change and transition, it can be particularly difficult to explain organizational challenges and gain support for implementing transitional changes. Schlechty (2009) describes the roles of leaders during transitional periods:

- Leaders must be convinced that the superordinate goal of schooling is to provide students with engaging tasks that result in them learning those things with the most value for themselves, their parents and the larger society.
- Leaders must ensure that they are clear about this core business of schools and must be willing to shape accordingly the direction of all activities in the school.
- Leaders must give and encourage others to give a great deal of attention to defining the position and role of students.

Hord and Sommers (2008) add to Schlechty's compilation by listing the seven vital "C"s of leadership during systemic transformation:
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Coaching
- Change
- Conflict
- Creativity
- Courage

Hall and Hord (2000) offer a set of principles for guiding and implementing change.
- **Grief is a key part of change.** Change is a process, not an event.
- Change facilitators can be very visible and dynamic, but change implementers need to have patience and work daily with persistence.
- An organization does not change until the individuals in it change.
- Innovations come in different sizes. An innovation is, in fact, a bundle of smaller innovations.
- **The most important interventions are the little ones….the "one-legged interviews."**
- There will be no change in outcomes until new practices are implemented.
- Administrator leadership is essential to long-term success.
- **Mandates can work** when accompanied by continuing communication, ongoing training, on-site coaching, and time for implementation.
- The school is the primary unit for change.
- Facilitating change is a team effort.
- Appropriate interventions reduce resistance to change.
- The context of school influences the process of change, including physical features, policies and structures that shape the staff's work, and the beliefs and values that are abroad.

Taking lessons from some of the world's most successful companies, Fullan (2011) lays out six secrets to support leaders in developing their own theory of action to guide and implement change:
- **Love Your Employees**
- **Connect peers with purpose** in a focused manner (in working out solutions to try for the improvements you want.) Then participate yourself as a learner. Be an expert at moving the group along. Push for precision and specificity.
- **Capacity building prevails: Do capacity building, which trumps judgmentalism.**
- **Organize for "Learning is the work,"** meaning learning is not just PD workshops, but reflection and data gathering *during* the daily work.
- **Transparency rules,** i.e., transparency about data and who is doing well and who isn't and transparency as public teaching.
- **Systems learn.**

Characteristics of leadership are also discussed in depth in Heifetz and Linsky's *Leadership on the Line* (2002). This book focuses on being an effective leader during times of change and/or transition. While they advocate for delegating responsibilities to colleagues, mostly to allow organizational members to build their leadership abilities,

Heifetz and Linsky intend to strengthen the leadership skills of individuals who are striving to create adaptive change. Because change and transformation commonly involve loss, there is often great resistance. *Leadership on the Line* (2002) insists that leaders must take risks and confront organizational members with loss in order to achieve organizational transformation, despite the disturbance to a group's equilibrium. Additionally, during this process, it is vital that leaders distinguish between technical and adaptive change. Ultimately, technical solutions fix problems on the surface. While it may initially appear that a problem has been solved, technical solutions are temporary, and thus, the problem is likely to arise again. Adaptive challenges, however, require learning new ways, making shifts in norms and values, and altering organizational culture.

During times of transition and adaptive change, many researchers agree that leaders must keep a broad perspective of the situation at hand and dedicate much time and energy to constant reflection. The process of stepping back from a situation to gain perspective, while remaining engaged, is referred to as "getting on the balcony" (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). "Getting on the balcony" allows a leader to thoroughly analyze a situation, determine technical and adaptive challenges, and gauge the level of support and/or resistance from their colleagues. Although supportive colleagues are commonly seen as ideal, research on leadership claims that conflicts are a healthy component of a transitionary/change process. In agreement with Heiftez and Linsky (2002), Fullan suggests four ideas for building organizational comfort with conflict:
- Create a holding environment formed by a network of relationships within which people feel safe to tackle conflicts without feeling failure. This environment should depict trust and cohesion.
- Control the temperature of the environment; be attentive to the level of tension and resistance being felt by members.
- Pace the work that will cause adaptive change by parceling out the change and lengthening the agenda over a longer timeline.
- Show organizational members the future by reminding them of the positively-framed common vision, mission, and values.

Overall, leaders should mobilize others within the organization to take initiative, build their own leadership skills, and confront conflict without fear. While facing resistance from their team, a strong leader who is able to maintain his or her composure will demonstrate an ability to create adaptive change.

Stakeholders as Partners

Due to the fact that adaptive change often requires the support of a range of stakeholders, researchers stress the importance of forming partnerships with stakeholders while trying to undergo systemic change (Childress et al., 2007; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). The most common stakeholder partnerships that should be formed during district change efforts are with teachers unions, parents, school boards, community and advocacy groups, local politicians, and policymakers (Childress et al., 2005). District leaders should try to influence these stakeholders to abide by the organizational strategy while using incentives, if necessary. Other external partnerships that could contribute to the successful execution of the district's strategy are with local businesses, foundations, and universities; each of these can contribute to building organizational capacity. Ultimately, it is important to build partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders because these relationships allow an organization to learn from a variety of viewpoints (Senge, 2006). Communities, because of their say in school boards, are viewed as a crucial partner in the process of district transformation (Schlechty, 2009).

Obstacles of the Change Process

Researchers mention three key elements that can act as hurdles during the change process: communication, conflict management, and maintaining focus (Fullan, 2004; Kotter, 2002). Essential for increasing motivation, gaining support, and receiving critical feedback, communication can ensure trust and transparency. By communicating with stakeholders and members of the organizations through meetings, newspapers, internet websites, newsletters, and other direct means of contact, a leader can build credibility and earn support for the changes that are being made.

Along with communication, however, Fullan (2004) emphasizes the need to maintain focus on the organizational vision and strategy. Although it is important to consistently monitor and manage other interests and issues,

maintaining focus on the long-term goal will allow for more purposeful actions, decreased internal tension, and more productive negotiations.

In *The Change Agents' Handbook* (Hutton, 1994), a mushroom is used as a metaphor to describe the change process. Mushrooms grow out of individual interpretations of actions and events as a change process unfolds. In most cases, intervening in response to individual actions will not kill a poisonous mushroom but instead will contribute to its further growth. To sustain or kill a mushroom, interventions must be aimed at its constructed theme, not one of the individual actions (p.234-250).

Overall, most educational leadership experts agree that trust is crucial for motivation, risk taking, conflict management and systemic transformation. When trying to create adaptive changes in a school district, a collaborative culture and distributed leadership are necessary. Through clear communication, a district leader can remain informed about the values and beliefs of various stakeholders and use that information to steer the team towards a common vision through a concise strategy.

Ready-Fire-Aim

Michael Fullan's comment on Peters & Waterman: "In 1982, Peters and Waterman offered the metaphor "ready-fire-aim" to capture the action bias of high performing companies that they studied. The concept was intuitively appealing but it was hard to find the savvy in there. It turns out that they were right, and we now have good evidence of the particular operational meaning of that famous phrase—and rich in insights it truly is. There is a tight cluster of change-savvy ideas embedded in the "ready-fire-aim" wisdom."

9 Insights
1. Relationships first (too fast/too slow)
2. Honor the implementation dip
3. Beware of fat plans
4. Behaviors before beliefs
5. Communication during implementation is paramount
6. Learn about implementation during implementation
7. Excitement prior to implementation is fragile
8. Take risks and learn
9. It is okay to be assertive
<div align="center">(Peters & Waterman, 1982)</div>

<u>FULLAN'S elaboration of Peters and Waterman's 9 elements</u>

Relationships first (too fast/too slow)
    "Haji Ali taught me the most important lesson I've learned in my life: to slow down and make building relationships as important as building projects."

    Careful entry into a new setting
    Listening to and learning from those who have been there longer
    Engaging in fact-finding and joint problem solving
    Forthrightly addressing people's concerns
    Being enthusiastic, genuine, and sincere about the change circumstances
    Obtaining buy-in for what needs fixing
    Developing a credible plan for making that fix

Honor the implementation dip

Beware of fat plans

Behaviors before beliefs
> Do not load up on vision, evidence, and sense of urgency. Rather give people
> Experiences in relatively non-threatening circumstances, and build on it,
> especially through interaction with trusted peers. [Bill Conard w/ peer observations]

"Script the critical moves" – from *Switch* by Heath and Heath (2010)

Communication during implementation is paramount

Learn about implementation during implementation
> …by bringing people together who are succeeding and who are struggling,
> making sure it's not about "why can't you be more like your brother,"
> but rather, "some are figuring it out and we can learn from them."

Excitement prior to implementation is fragile
> So don't overhype or come across as phony or cheerleading; celebrate small successes along the way based
> on substance. And do so a lot.

Take risks and learn
> A license to innovate and problem-solve. We view mistakes as an opportunity
> to learn.

It's OK to be assertive
> Combine assertiveness (about what needs doing) with humility (about how to do it.)

Persist no matter what. Resilience is your best friend.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: PELP Coherence Framework

Source: Childress, S., Elmore, R., Grossman, A. (2005).   Managing school districts for high performance. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Appendix 2: Hargreaves and Shirley's Theory of Change

Source: Hargreaves, A and Shirley, D. (2009). The fourth way: The inspiring future for educational change. Thousand Oaks, CA. Corwin Press.

Appendix 3: John Kotter: 8 Steps in the Change Process

Action
• **Increase Urgency**
• **Build a guiding team with the credibility, skills, network, and reputations to provoke change**
• **The guiding team creates a sensible and clear vision and strategy**
• **Communicate the vision and strategy clearly to gain support from colleagues outside the leadership team**
• **Minimize obstacles**
• **Produce short-term wins during the beginning of the change process to gain momentum and positive energy**
• **Carefully choose and scaffold changes**
• **Nurture the new organizational culture to ensure that the new change is not overtaken by past behaviors**

Source: Kotter, J. (2002). The heart of change: Real-life stories of how people change their organizations. Harvard Business School Press: Boston, Massachusetts.