

Six Factors Of Successful School Improvement: Blueprint For Reform Or Process For Continual School Improvement?

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The last two decades have brought considerable attention to school-wide improvements intended to raise student achievement—particularly in the area of literacy. In response to the emphasis on improved student achievement, many promising programs for school improvement have emerged. These programs, often centered around particular curriculum or teaching practices, cannot effectively address the issue without approaching the school culture as a whole. It is common for such programs to put forth a blueprint for school improvement, often viewing the changes as a set of procedures that, if followed, will automatically lead to increased student achievement. However, if school improvement is to be effective and have a lasting impact, it must be approached as a process rather than a blueprint. School improvement is a continual process and requires changes in the culture of the school.

In order to create an effective school culture, the improvement process must combine six factors: professional development, monitoring and evaluation, level and type of staff involvement, area of focus/vision, resource reallocation and leadership. Implementation of a program that omits any one of these factors will not result in the envisioned changes. As an example, school improvement programs that do not provide adequate professional development offerings for each staff member will not produce a change in classroom practice; similarly, a school improvement program that does not include careful monitoring and evaluation will have no ability to assess implementation progress. Any program for school improvement must be evaluated by the extent to which these factors are present. Each of the six factors will be summarized briefly:

Professional Development

Professional development is a key element in school change. As a school identifies the need for change, professional development that will result in a change in classroom practice becomes central to the process. The staff development must involve all staff in quality inservice activities that provide strategies to achieve

professional development through inservice offerings, opportunities for peer observation and feedback, involvement of all staff members in the support plan, time for collaborative study of teaching and implementation of curricular/instructional plan, clean evaluation procedure for professional development plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The two primary issues that need to be addressed in the monitoring and evaluation activities are (1) student performance and (2) the implementation of new practices. In addition, benchmarks must be designed in order to measure progress along the way. Goals and benchmarks must be measurable so that specific, practical data can be used to make the necessary modifications or changes to the original plan. Finally, the establishment of goals and benchmarks should be coupled with thorough record-keeping that includes quarterly data on each student. One of the most important issues schools face is setting aside time for such analysis, which must take place on a regular, ongoing basis (weekly, quarterly, yearly, etc.). These activities should become a regular part of a faculty's work and eventually lead to the school becoming a learning organization,

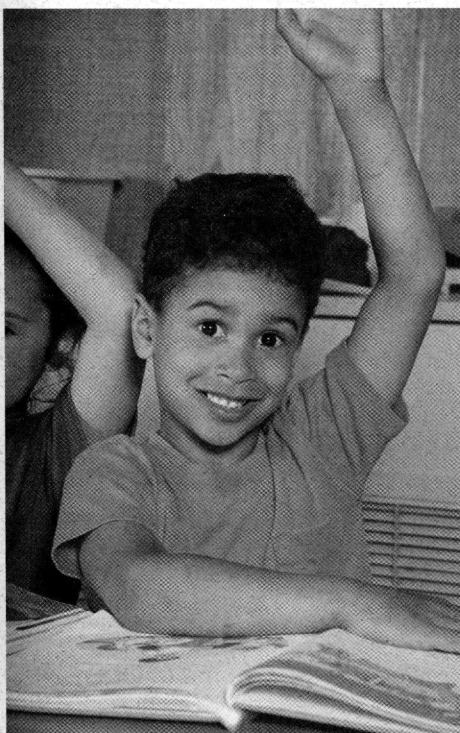
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where the entire staff is focused on continual inquiry and evaluation of the quality/effectiveness of teaching. Data sources include student achievement scores, implementation evaluation, teacher evaluations, and external feedback on adopted practices.

instructional focus goals. Joyce and Showers (1995) indicate the necessity of an internal support structure such as a peer coaching model and continue with recommendations for effective professional development programs. Their recommendations include: at least 40 hours of pro-

where the entire staff is focused on continual inquiry and evaluation of the quality/effectiveness of teaching. Data sources include student achievement scores, implementation evaluation, teacher evaluations, and external feedback on adopted practices.

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Level, Type of Level and Type of Involvement

Involvement in the change process takes place along two dimensions: who is involved (the level to which all staff members are involved) and how they are involved (the type of involvement). Consistency among and involvement of, the staff is crucial for schoolwide reform. In order for schools to make the kinds of changes necessary to ensure that all students benefit from the improvements, the entire staff must be involved in the change process. This happens as a result of a variety of factors, including strong leadership, a collective sense of responsibility, and the existence of a climate of trust and professionalism where difficult issues may be raised and discussed openly. The distribution of power in a school will determine the level and type of involvement of its members.

Area of Focus/Vision

Areas of focus found to be consistent with high performing schools include: improving student outcomes, creating intellectually challenging teaching practices and a structured day. Schools tend to experience more success when there exists a shared vision and a common value system, where consensus on the definition of the goals is reached, and when the entire school is focused on teaching and learning.

Resource Reallocation

All of the resources available to the school must be considered for reallocation in order for school reform to take hold; willingness to reallocate resources becomes an indicator of staff commitment to change. Resources must be coordinated in a manner that optimizes the utilization of time, space, people and funding.

Leadership

The quality of the leadership of the principal is a significant characteristic of effective schools and has been the topic of much research. However, as stated by MacGilchrist (1995), a single individual, regardless of talent or determination will not be able to change a school without the involvement of others. The leadership team, directed by the principal, has direct authority for decisions in terms of power distribution and decision making norms, distribution of time and money, allocation of space and the presence of voice in decision-making.

Each of the six factors must work in concert with the others in order to produce the level of change desired. Implementation of a program that omits any one of these factors will not result in the envisioned changes. An improvement as routine as a new approach to language arts will not effect the desired improvements without consideration of all the above factors. School change requires a change in the very culture of the school. Improvement is a process and, as such, school faculties should evaluate potential programs based on the inclusion of these factors. The change process is a continual spiral with a tension to balance and maintain all six factors. The process of change is not a destination, but the creation of new norms for the school. It includes the creation of a school culture that can be responsive to the changing needs of the students and the community. A school that incorporates all six of the factors will be able to recognize and address problems and create solutions. ■