



A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO SUPPORT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Prepared for Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic Education

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In the following report, Hanover Research and ULEAD explore how school leaders can take a systemic approach to school improvement.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In Utah, the state aims to support school improvement efforts by “build[ing] capacity for schools and local education agencies (LEAs) to engage in continuous efforts to improve student achievement and provide educational excellence for each Utah student.”¹ While school improvement can cover a diverse array of initiatives and approaches, research shows that schools improve when they take a “disciplined and active” approach to implementing frameworks for school improvement.²

To provide high-quality support and services to its districts and constituents, Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic Education (ULEAD) is interested in understanding best practices for systemic school improvement. To support this effort, Hanover Research (Hanover) reviewed empirical research and expert organizational literature on Systems Theory, frameworks to support systemic school improvement, and research on engaging and communicating school improvement efforts to stakeholders. This report includes two sections:

- **Section I: Systems Approach to School Improvement** describes the essential elements of Systems Theory, examines the significance and impact of taking a systems approach to educational improvement, and presents three research-based frameworks for systemic school improvement to support school leaders.
- **Section II: Communicating Change Systems to Stakeholders** discusses strategies for engaging stakeholders in systemic school improvement efforts and effectively communicating organizational change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School leaders should consider:



Establishing a committee or working group comprised of a variety of internal and external stakeholders to lead improvement efforts.



Beginning systemic school improvement planning with evaluation in mind by developing measurable outcomes to continuously evaluate improvement efforts.



Engaging internal and external stakeholders throughout the development and implementation of school improvement initiatives by incorporating stakeholder feedback into the development of any program or initiative and implementing a proactive communications strategy.

¹ “Utah System of Support for School Improvement.” Utah State Board of Education, June 2018. p. 1.
<https://www.schools.utah.gov/file/0661922d-d4dc-419f-b462-01acae3b070b>

² “A Vision for School Improvement: Applying the Framework for Great Schools.” New York City Department of Education. p. 1.
http://www.teachersquad.com/uploads/5/8/2/0/58209821/avisionforschoolimprovement_applyingtheframeworkforgreatschools.pdf

KEY FINDINGS



A systemic approach to school improvement recognizes that school systems are complex institutions comprised of a variety of interdependent sub-systems, where creating lasting educational improvement requires impacting change at all levels of the system. Systemic school improvement highlights how the relationships between education levels, stakeholders, regulations, and processes can promote or inhibit improvement efforts. Research supports that a systemic approach to school improvement positively impacts reform success and student outcomes, while a disjointed or isolated approach can impede improvement.



Districts can use a framework to guide systemic school improvement efforts. Three research-based frameworks that take a systemic approach to school improvement include WestEd Center for School Turnaround's 4 Domains of Rapid Improvement, Education Development Trust's (EDT's) Six Accelerators for At Scale Educational Improvement, and the New York City (NYC) Department of Education's Framework for Great Schools. Districts that follow these frameworks should adapt and personalize them to best meet their schools' needs.



District and school leaders can implement systemic school improvement by focusing on leadership for change, instruction and learning, staff quality and support, and school culture and stakeholder involvement. These components represent areas of overlap across the systemic school improvement frameworks to effectively improve school outcomes. A systemic approach recognizes that improvement in these areas necessitates support from across stakeholder groups, connectedness between the district and schools, and the interdependency of each component.



Implementing systemic improvement initiatives requires an ongoing engagement and communication process to build and sustain stakeholder support. The engagement process should include continued communication with and incorporation of feedback from stakeholders during the improvement design, implementation, and evaluation process. Districts should monitor feedback from diverse stakeholder groups to ensure that improvement strategies are aligned and cohesive. An effective communications strategy focuses on why and how changes will occur and are concrete, specific, simple, repetitive, and targeted to different audiences.

SECTION I: SYSTEMS APPROACH TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

This section describes the essential elements of a systems approach in education, examines the significance and impact of taking a systems approach to educational improvement, and presents three research-based frameworks to support improvement efforts.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH IN EDUCATION

Across sectors, **systems thinking is an approach that values the interrelation of components as interdependent to achieve an outcome.**³ A systems approach “is greater than the sum of its constituent components because the relationship between the different components adds value to the system.”⁴ Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, popularized the concept of the learning organization by emphasizing how systems thinking is necessary to any change management.⁵ Systems thinking results in a deeper analysis and model for change by analyzing how relationships within a system influence the system as a whole. A systems approach, therefore, includes the following characteristics:⁶

- Iterative and adaptive planning based on learning and experimentation;
- A focus on multi-stakeholder approaches and co-creation with local stakeholders;
- The search for context-specific solutions rather than generic ones based on good practice elsewhere;
- A recognition that pre-existing paradigms and pre-conceived ideas often limit our ability to understand local contexts;
- A focus on fostering and use of complex resources; and
- Increased work across organizational boundaries, reducing differences in power, bringing in different ideas and perspectives resulting in a deeper, less biased understanding of the systems we engage in.

Often compared against cause and effect or linear approaches, a systemic approach is not linear but rather “recognizes more complex interdependencies and how multiple components may affect each other in different ways.”⁷ While a traditional approach may look at how changing individual components lead to change in a certain outcome, systems thinking considers how the components within a system interact and affect one another to produce change.⁸ Figure 1.1 on the following page highlights additional differences between traditional, linear thinking and systems thinking.

³ Mania-Singer, J. “A Systems Theory Approach to the District Central Office’s Role in School-Level Improvement.” *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice & Research*, 7:1, Summer 2017. p. 72. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1151585.pdf>

⁴ Ndaruhutse, S., C. Jones, and A. Riggall. “Why Systems Thinking Is Important for the Education Sector.” Education Development Trust, ERIC, 2019. p. 13. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED603263.pdf>

⁵ Senge, P.M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Doubleday/Currency, 1990. https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Fifth_Discipline.html?id=bVZqAAAAMAAJ

⁶ Bullet points quoted verbatim from: Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 14.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁸ Ibid.

Figure 1.1: Traditional Vs. Systems Thinking

TRADITIONAL, LINEAR THINKING	SYSTEMS THINKING
Looks at individual parts often in isolation	Looks at the whole of the system
Focuses on content	Focuses on process
Takes a cause and effect approach and sometimes attempts to fix symptoms rather than underlying problems	Seeks to understand potential causes and the dynamic factors that might be at play, including feedback loops
Tends to think 'technically' about a problem and think that a problem is easily solvable by a simple solution	Tends to think 'big picture' including factoring in incentives and the political economy when thinking about how hard it might be to solve this problem

Source: Education Development Trust⁹

As school systems are complex, multifaceted institutions with a wide variety of stakeholders, power structures, processes, regulations, communication systems, and external pressures, a systems approach is necessary to recognize the interdependency of these components that may inhibit or promote effective change.¹⁰ This complexity requires a deeper approach to understanding the interplay of actors that together can improve student outcomes.¹¹ Indeed, failing to recognize the interdependency of connected components of the educational environment can lead to isolated improvement, an inability to address the root cause of challenges, and consequently a failure to produce meaningful change.¹² Accordingly, “[t]oo much bureaucracy can impede that process. All too often, districts have too many layers separating central offices and schools, departments that function in isolation from each other, too many or unclear goals, or onerous processes that require too many steps to solve issues as they arise.”¹³

IMPACT OF SYSTEMIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Research supports that a systemic approach to school improvement positively impacts reform success and student outcomes, while a disjointed or isolated approach can impede improvement.¹⁴

⁹ Figure contents quoted verbatim from: Ibid.

¹⁰ [1] Ibid., p. 21. [2] Thornton, B., T. Shepperson, and S. Canavero. “A Systems Approach to School Improvement: Program Evaluation and Organizational Learning.” *Education*, 128:1, Fall 2007. p. 48. Accessed via EbscoHost.

¹¹ Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 21.

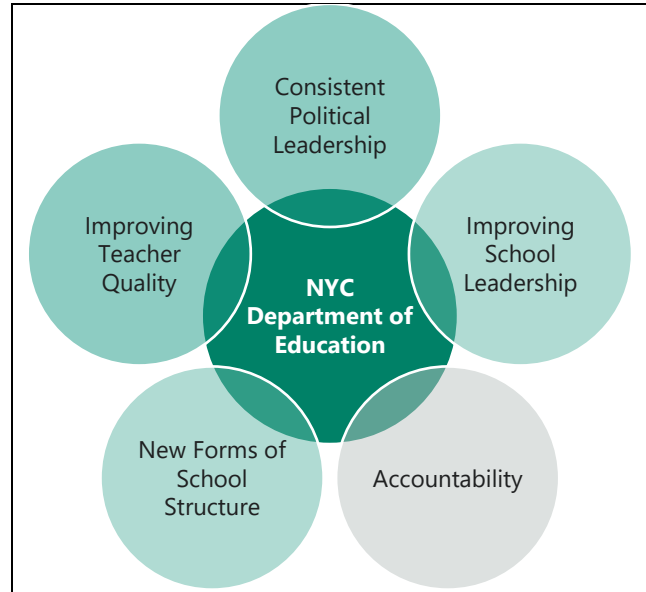
¹² Thornton, Shepperson, and Canavero, Op. cit., p. 48.

¹³ Zavadsky, H. “Scaling Turnaround: A District-Improvement Approach.” *Education Outlook, American Enterprise Institute*, 2013. p. 3. https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/-scaling-turnaround-a-districtimprovement-approach_160718533629.pdf

¹⁴ For example, see: [1] Heck, R.H. and P. Hallinger. “Collaborative Leadership Effects on School Improvement: Integrating Unidirectional-and Reciprocal-Effects Models.” *The Elementary School Journal*, 111:2, 2010. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Philip_Hallinger/publication/279417733_Collaborative_Leadership_Effects_on_School_Improvement_Integrating_Unidirectional-_and_Reciprocal-Effects_Models/links/55c681e308aebc967df537fb.pdf [2] Sanders, M.G. “Principal Leadership for School, Family, and Community Partnerships: The Role of a Systems Approach to Reform Implementation.” *American Journal of Education*, 120:2, 2014. pp. 233–254. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mavis_Sanders/publication/272594056_Principal_Leadership_for_School_Family_and_Community_Partnerships_The_Role_of_a_Systems_Approach_to_Reform_Implementation/links/578d218708ae59aa66815769.pdf [3] Elwick, A.R. and T. McAleavy. “Interesting Cities: Five Approaches to Urban School Reform.” Education Development Trust, Education Development Trust, 2015.

For instance, researchers used interviews with city, state, and school educational leaders and an analysis of student data from the NYC Department of Education to show that a systemic approach to city-wide educational improvement by the Bloomberg administration from 2002 to 2014 led to improvements in student outcomes. The NYC Department of Education’s systemic approach focused on providing district and political support for local school improvements, including creating new forms of school structures; providing consistent leadership and vision at the city and school levels with more support, training, and autonomy for school leaders; improving teacher quality; and implementing accountability measures (Figure 1.2).¹⁶ Following these systemic changes throughout the city’s education system, NYC saw an increase in student performance on national assessments, an increase in the graduation rate, and a decrease in the dropout rate. The school system showed increases in Grades 4 and 8 on both math and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between 2003 and 2013. Notably, while the city performs below the state on the NAEP assessment, NYC made greater gains than New York state or the country as a whole, despite a higher proportion of traditionally underrepresented and economically disadvantaged student groups.¹⁷

Figure 1.2: NYC DOE Theory of Change



Source: Education Development Trust¹⁵

Similarly, Chugach School District in Alaska implemented systemic change starting in 1994 through a four-part framework for systemic educational transformation that includes shared vision, shared leadership, standards-based design, and continuous improvement. Taking a systemic approach to improvement enabled the district to develop “a successful performance system using input from schools, communities and businesses and allowing all students to meet with success and take ownership of their educational careers.” As recognition for their efforts, Chugach School District won the 2001 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for continuous improvement in overall performance.¹⁸

In a 2010 study in *The Elementary School Journal*, Heck and Hallinger specifically examine the relationship between collaborative leadership, capacity for school improvement, and growth in student learning and how these relationships impact school leadership and student learning, noting “these constructs as embedded within an organizational system that is dynamic and changing over time.”¹⁹ The sample includes Grade 3 students (N = 13,391) from a random sample of 195 elementary schools in one U.S. state. Research methods include longitudinal survey data on collaborative leadership and school improvement capacity

<https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/EducationDevelopmentTrust/files/06/06bfe622-3c74-4db8-a6ae-e2a06cc9e005.pdf> [4] Mania-Singer, Op. cit.

¹⁵ Figure adapted verbatim from: Elwick and McAleavy, Op. cit., p. 73.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 69–72.

¹⁸ Clem, J. and W. Battino. “A Systemic Change Experience in the Chugach School District.” *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning*, 50:2, April 3, 2006. p. 35. Accessed via EbscoHost.

¹⁹ Heck and Hallinger, Op. cit., p. 227.

collected from certified staff, students, and a random parent sample over four years. Surveys measuring collaborative leadership included Likert scales with constructs on “shared vision and collaborative work, distributed among role groups in the school, focused on building conditions for professional learning and change, and directed toward improvement of conditions supporting learning.”²⁰ School improvement capacity was measured through scales that examined “the extent to which the school has educational programs that are aligned to state curriculum standards, seeks ways to implement programs that promote student achievement over time, has a well-developed range of academic and social support services for students, and has a professional teaching staff that is well qualified for assignments and responsibilities and committed to the school’s purpose.”²¹ The researchers collected math scores for students from Grades 3-5 over three years from Stanford Achievement Test items that aligned with state curricular goals.²²

Results supported the researchers’ claim that “changes in collaborative leadership and school improvement capacity are mutually reinforcing processes—that is, changes in the organization gain momentum over time through changes in leadership and school improvement capacity that are organic and mutually responsive.”²³ Figure 1.3 presents the researchers’ findings and conclusions.

Figure 1.3: Findings and Implications on the Relationship and Change in Collaborative Leadership, Capacity for School Improvement, and Growth in Student Learning over Time

FINDING	IMPLICATION
Initial achievement was positively related to subsequent changes in both collaborative leadership (ES = 0.12) and change in school improvement capacity (ES = 0.33).	This provides empirical support for the premise that schools can improve outcomes regardless of their initial achievement levels by changing key organizational processes (i.e., leadership and improvement capacity).
Initial school improvement capacity was related to subsequent change in leadership (ES = 0.39), and initial collaborative leadership was related to subsequent change in school improvement capacity (ES = 0.18).	This result implies that leadership and school improvement capacity represent mutually reinforcing, or parallel, change processes—each initial status factor explaining positive growth in the other change factor.
Change in collaborative leadership was related positively to change in school improvement capacity (ES = 0.17), and change in improvement capacity was related positively to student growth rate (ES = 0.19). Conversely, school growth rate was also predictive of change in school improvement capacity (ES = 0.24), and change in school improvement capacity was predictive of change in leadership (ES = 0.37).	The presence of the hypothesized indirect feedback loop was confirmed. This finding is also consistent with the premise that change in schools’ outcomes can be the impetus for further changes in capacity building and other organizational processes.

Source: The Elementary School Journal²⁴

Furthermore, research shows that not using a systemic approach to school improvement can hinder success. In a 2017 study in the *Administrative Issues Journal*, Meyers used a Systems Theory approach to study how the relationships and perceptions between members of the district central office and principals impacted school improvement outcomes. Using qualitative research methods, surveys, and sociograms, the researcher determined that components of Systems Theory were not present in the district, noting that results showed “sparse connections, a low number of reciprocated relationships, and a high number of

²⁰ Ibid., p. 237.

²¹ Ibid., p. 238.

²² Ibid., p. 239.

²³ Ibid., p. 243.

²⁴ Figure contents quoted verbatim with slight modification from: Ibid.

isolated actors. The low density and lack of reciprocity indicate ineffective transfer of knowledge and information across the system and less sharing of ideas and feedback between the actors.”²⁵ The lack of relationships and connections indicative to a systemic approach negatively impacted school improvement efforts due to a “mismatch” between schools’ needs and the central office’s support and input for school improvement, resulting in the maintenance of disparity between high performing schools and low performing schools.²⁶

FRAMEWORKS FOR SYSTEMIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

To support district and school leaders, Hanover and ULEAD highlight three research-based frameworks (described in Figure 1.4) that can guide systemic school improvement efforts: WestEd Center for School Turnaround’s **4 Domains of Rapid Improvement**, Education Development Trust’s (EDT’s) **Six Accelerators for At Scale Educational Improvement**, and the New York City (NYC) Department of Education’s **Framework for Great Schools**. These frameworks examine how essential components of education systems work together to promote positive change and improve student outcomes. While each framework addresses different content areas, most frameworks also include further structural elements and systemic relationships.

Figure 1.4: Three Frameworks for Systemic School Improvement

FRAMEWORK	DEVELOPERS	OVERVIEW	ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS
4 Domains of Rapid Improvement ²⁷	WestEd	This framework offers four research-based rapid improvement practices for systemic turnaround and improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Turnaround Leadership ▪ Talent Development ▪ Instructional Transformation ▪ Culture Shift
Six Accelerators for At Scale Educational Improvement ²⁸	Education Development Trust	This framework examines the interconnectedness of six accelerators for designing and implementing education reform at scale.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vision and Leadership ▪ Coalitions for Change ▪ Delivery Architecture including School Collaboration ▪ Data for Collective Accountability and Improvement ▪ Teacher and School Leadership Effectiveness ▪ Evidence-Informed Policy and Learning
The Framework for Great Schools ²⁹	New York City Department of Education	This framework identifies six elements that work together across and within school levels to promote school improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Effective School Leadership ▪ Strong Family-Community Ties ▪ Supportive Environment ▪ Rigorous Instruction

²⁵ Mania-Singer, Op. cit., p. 78.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 69–80.

²⁷ Meyers, C.V. et al. “Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework. The Center on School Turnaround Four Domains Series.” Center on School Turnaround at WestEd, ERIC, 2017. p. 3. https://csti.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CST_Four-Domains-Framework-Final.pdf

²⁸ Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 10.

²⁹ “Framework for Great Schools.” New York City Department of Education. <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/framework/default.htm>

FRAMEWORK	DEVELOPERS	OVERVIEW	ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaborative Teachers ▪ Trust

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF SYSTEMIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The following subsections examine the essential components common across the school improvement frameworks in Figure 1.4 above, including:



While each framework has slightly different components, the areas of overlap reveal the systems that are key to school improvement efforts. Additionally, when engaging in systemic school improvement, district and school administrators should personalize the framework to a school’s specific areas of need.

Notably, to effectively improve schools and student outcomes, district and school leaders should take a systems approach to the process of implementing the following essential areas for school improvement. While these areas themselves represent components of the education system, effective implementation is also key.³⁰ A systemic approach views improvement efforts as ongoing and interconnected to and interdependent on other components of the broader system, rather than as a limited, temporary, or fragmented initiative.³¹ Therefore, districts should take a purposeful and strategic approach to implementation.

Additional Reading
 Click [here](#) to access WestEd’s resource “Jump-Starting Instructional Transformation for Rapid School Improvement: A Guide for Principals,” which offers guidance and activities for principals implementing systemic school improvement initiatives.

Accordingly, “when education reform is implemented, it needs a whole change management programme with a focus on capacity development to make it happen. It is not change for change’s sake, but rather change that results in sustained improved learning outcomes for all.”³² Additional components of a systems approach to implementation include inputs, outputs, and feedback loops to form a cycle of ongoing and continuous improvement.³³ For example, one model for implementing systemic change recommends four phases of creating readiness, initial implementation, institutionalization, and ongoing evaluation, as described in Figure 1.5 on the following page.³⁴

³⁰ Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 43.

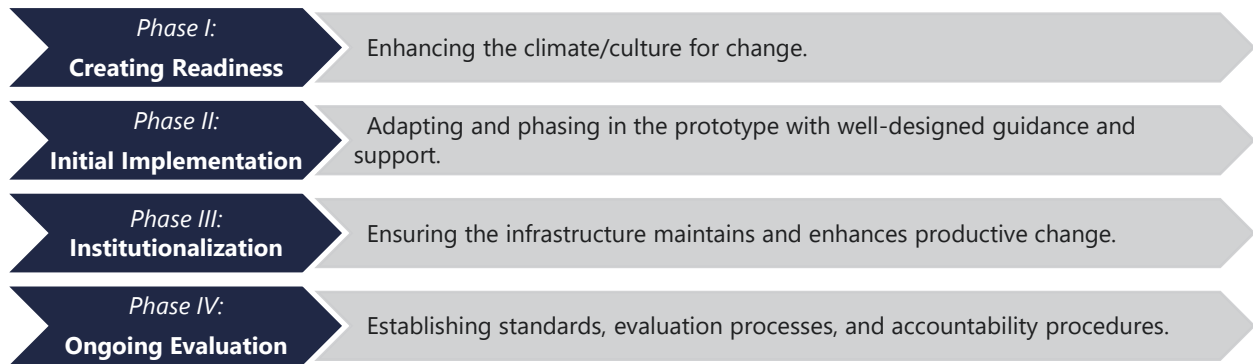
³¹ [1] Adelman, H.S. and L. Taylor. “Systemic Change for School Improvement.” *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17:1, 2007. p. 56. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.583.1124&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
 [2] Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 13.

³² Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 43.

³³ [1] Mania-Singer, Op. cit., p. 78. [2] Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 35.

³⁴ Adelman and Taylor, Op. cit., p. 62.

Figure 1.5: Phases of Change Process



Source: Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation³⁵

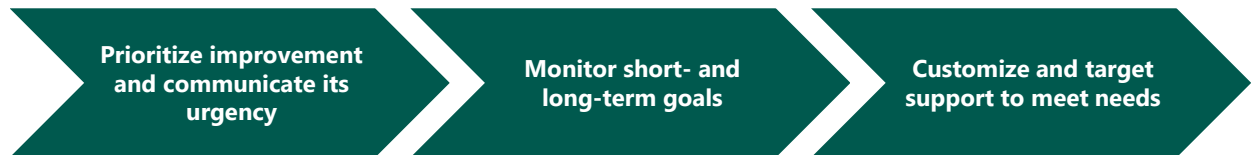
LEADERSHIP

All three frameworks include a focus on leadership to support systemic improvement and set a vision for change. The EDT’s framework argues that a systems approach to school improvement requires leaders who understand the complexities of the system and how the components work together. It proposes that leaders should have the following skills to propel systemic school improvement:³⁶

- Strategic thinking;
- Adaptability and resilience in response to unforeseen outcomes;
- Horizon scanning to see how the education system might be impacted by changes outside of it; and
- The ability to work across organizational boundaries and deal with ambiguity.

Similarly, WestEd’s framework identifies “turnaround leadership” as a key driver of school turnaround, where leaders at the state, district, and school levels work together to improve schools. Indeed, “Because the state education agency, districts, and schools function collectively as a system, leaders’ initiatives at any one level of the system affect other levels.”³⁷ Figure 1.6 displays WestEd’s practices for states, districts, and schools to implement turnaround leadership.

Figure 1.6: Turnaround Leadership Practices



Source: WestEd³⁸

Alternatively, the NYC Department of Education’s Framework for Great Schools focuses on principal leadership as leading by example and supporting educators and student outcomes.³⁹

³⁵ Figure content quoted verbatim with modification from: Ibid., pp. 62, 68.

³⁶ Bullet points quoted verbatim from: Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 31.

³⁷ Meyers et al., Op. cit., p. 4.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 4–7.

³⁹ “Framework for Great Schools.” New York City Department of Education. <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/framework/default.htm>

LEARNING AND INSTRUCTION

Each framework references components of learning and instruction that impact student outcomes as part of the broader system. For example, the NYC Department of Education’s Framework for Great Schools prioritizes rigorous, Common Core-aligned instruction that engages students, sets high standards, and develops students’ critical thinking skills.⁴⁰ Alternatively, the EDT’s framework takes a broader approach that recommends an evidence-based approach to developing instruction and learning initiatives, recognizing that a systems approach to improvement does not follow a linear cause and effect relationship, so using instructional practices backed by evidence is vital.⁴¹ Additionally, WestEd’s framework’s domain of “instructional transformation” includes a system-wide focus on improving student learning outcomes through effective instructional practices, data-driven instructional decision making, the combination of high expectations and support for academic improvement, and actively removing both in-school and external barriers to student achievement.⁴² Figure 1.7 below presents the specific practices recommended for states, districts, and schools for creating systemic instructional transformation.

Figure 1.7: Instructional Transformation Practices



Source: WestEd⁴³

STAFF QUALITY AND SUPPORT

All three frameworks also highlight the significance of staff training, support, and collaboration to improving instruction and student outcomes. The EDT’s framework, for instance, specifies the necessity of building the “collective capacity” of educators in order to support instructional improvement efforts through pre-service training, in-service training, and peer-led training.⁴⁴ Similarly, the NYC DOE’s Framework for Great Schools includes “Collaborative Teachers” who participate in ongoing professional development and demonstrate commitment to instructional improvement.⁴⁵ In WestEd’s framework, “Talent Development” represents one of the four pillars for rapid school improvement, where educators at all levels commit to capacity building and supporting professional learning. Accordingly, “at all levels, educators utilize and hone their instructional and transformational leadership to build capacity in those they supervise by continually balancing support with accountability.”⁴⁶ Figure 1.8 on the following page highlights the strategic practices that support talent development.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 37.

⁴² Meyers et al., Op. cit., p. 18.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 19–21.

⁴⁴ Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 36.

⁴⁵ “Framework for Great Schools,” Op. cit.

⁴⁶ Meyers et al., Op. cit., p. 11.

Figure 1.8: Talent Development Practices



Source: WestEd⁴⁷

SCHOOL CULTURE AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Each framework also references the role that the school environment or culture plays in systemic school improvement. For example, the NYC Department of Education’s Framework for Great Schools references the importance of school culture through their “Supportive Environment” and “Trust” components, which focus on classroom and school environments that make students feel safe, supported, and challenged and where all stakeholders value and respect one another and work together to improve student outcomes.⁴⁸ Comparatively, the EDT’s framework focuses on establishing structural elements, stating that “clear structures, roles and responsibilities [...] help create coherence within a system so that one part of a system is not inadvertently undermining what is happening elsewhere in the system.”⁴⁹

WestEd’s framework describes a “cultural shift” required for systemic improvement that includes all stakeholders working within and outside schools to reach goals, implement high academic expectations, and create a positive school climate of shared responsibility and respect.⁵⁰ This domain states that a “turnaround culture fuses strong community cohesion with an academic press; one without the other is insufficient.” Figure 1.9 below displays the practices required to engage in a “culture shift” for systemic and transformative school improvement.

Figure 1.9: Culture Shift Practices



Source: WestEd⁵¹

Furthermore, stakeholder involvement represents a critical component of changing school culture and creating a positive school environment. All three frameworks include the importance of stakeholder involvement, collaboration, and input to successful systemic improvement, either as a named pillar or as a component of a broader pillar. The EDT’s framework, for instance, posits that broad stakeholder involvement and forming “change coalitions” that cut across stakeholder groups are necessary for successfully changing complex systems, noting that “solutions and actions therefore rely on collaboration, and the negotiation of outcomes, rather than a technocratic approach.”⁵² This framework also points to the importance of ensuring

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 11–14.

⁴⁸ “Framework for Great Schools,” Op. cit.

⁴⁹ Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 33.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Meyers et al., Op. cit., pp. 26–28.

⁵² Ndaruhutse, Jones, and Riggall, Op. cit., p. 33.

buy-in and readiness for change among stakeholders such as teachers and principals, for successful change.⁵³

As shown in Figure 1.9, WestEd’s framework includes stakeholder input and engagement as critical components of the “cultural shift” required for transformative improvement. The practice “Solicit and act upon stakeholder input” recommends that district and school leaders gather stakeholder perspectives via surveys, focus groups, and forums; offer training on how to gather and act upon stakeholder input; and consider stakeholder perspectives when making decisions. The practice of “Engage students and families in pursuing education goals” focuses on involving parents in their child’s educational journey and planning and creating resources, budgets, and opportunities for family engagement.⁵⁴

Additionally, the NYC Department of education’s Framework for Great Schools notes that it is the responsibility of school leaders to enable stakeholder involvement by forming partnerships with families, community members, and local business and community organizations to bring community resources and strengths into schools.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Meyers et al., *Op. cit.*, pp. 26–28.

⁵⁵ “Framework for Great Schools,” *Op. cit.*

SECTION II: COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

This section discusses strategies for engaging stakeholders in systemic school improvement efforts and effectively communicating organizational changes to internal and external stakeholders.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS AND COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Stakeholder engagement and communication are essential to developing community support for new initiatives and leading through changes.⁵⁶ As adhering to systemic school improvement frameworks may require schools to change commonly accepted school procedures, school leadership should prepare teachers, students, and parents for these changes through a comprehensive engagement and communication strategy.⁵⁷ School leaders should prioritize communicating their school improvement vision and efforts throughout the entire process, not just when the initiative commences.⁵⁸ Stakeholder engagement efforts should include parents and members of the community as well as teachers and other school staff.⁵⁹ When community engagement is insufficient, community members may oppose instructional initiatives.⁶⁰ Thus, an effective engagement process builds community support for instructional initiatives and encourages community members to advocate for implementation.⁶¹

The engagement process should include authentic opportunities for stakeholders to provide input on policy development as well as communication about policies.⁶² Providing stakeholders who will be involved in implementation with opportunities for input into program design through a collaborative process helps ensure that stakeholders are aware of goals and expectations and builds a sense of ownership for new initiatives.⁶³

⁵⁶ Bartz, D.E., P. Rice, and C. Karnes. "Community Engagement: A Key Ingredient for Public Schools Gaining Stakeholders' Input and Support." *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, 36, 2018. p. 1. <http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Bartz,%20David%20E%20Community%20Engagement%20NFEASJ%20V36%20N%204%202018.pdf>

⁵⁷ "School Improvement Planning: A Handbook for Principals, Teachers, and School Counselors." Education Improvement Commission, 2000. p. 48. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/sihande.pdf>

⁵⁸ [1] "6 Lessons for Leading Change in Schools," Op. cit. [2] Bendixen, S.M. et al. "Change Capable Leadership: The Real Power Propelling Successful Change." Center for Creative Leadership, 2017. pp. 11–13. <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Change-Capable-Leadership.pdf> [3] "Change Management Best Practices Guide." United States Agency for International Development, May 8, 2015. p. 6. <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1868/597saj.pdf> [4] "Change Leadership - A Guide for School Leaders." Minnesota Department of Education, February 2019. pp. 12–13, 30. Downloaded from: http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=mde059459&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

⁵⁹ "High-Quality Curriculum and System Improvement." Learning First, January 2019. p. 17. <https://learningfirst.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Quality-curriculum-and-system-improvement.pdf>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Strategies for Community Engagement in School Turnaround." Reform Support Network, March 2014. p. 18. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/strategies-for-community-engagement-in-school-turnaround.pdf>

⁶² Ibid., p. 4.

⁶³ LaTurner and Lewis, Op. cit., p. 3.

Districts can establish a plan for engaging the community in new initiatives. For example, **Figure 2.1** shows a recommended community engagement process for school reform initiatives. This process begins with the development of an infrastructure to support community engagement, including engagement plans, staff members, and advisory groups. Once this infrastructure is in place, districts and schools can begin to communicate with community members and incorporate community participation and feedback into initiatives. This process converts community members into public advocates for the success of new initiatives.⁶⁴

Figure 2.1: Community Engagement Process for School Improvement Initiatives



Source: Reform Support Network⁶⁵

The community engagement process should include a proactive communications strategy to ensure that internal and external stakeholders are aware of planned reforms.⁶⁶ Communications should convey a positive message of improvement that reinforces the district’s or school’s goals for change and the benefits of change for stakeholders.⁶⁷

To develop a communication strategy, districts and schools must first identify their stakeholders with whom it is necessary to communicate improvement efforts and relevant changes. Administrators should identify who their stakeholders are, or who is affected by the change or has an impact on the change, both internally and externally.⁶⁸ Once the district or school identifies stakeholders, it can develop a communication strategy. The communication strategy should “ensure that the organization and its customers are aware of and understand the organizational rationale for the change.”⁶⁹ Successful communications focus on the “why” of improvement changes - in addition to communicating about what is happening, leaders should also be transparent and actively increase stakeholder understanding about *why* and *how* it is happening.⁷⁰ For communicating the ongoing status of improvement efforts to teachers, “a status update on the school improvement plan should be on the agenda of every staff meeting. Monthly updates will communicate the importance of the plan and provide a focus for the activities related to its implementation.”⁷¹

⁶⁴ “Strategies for Community Engagement in School Turnaround,” Op. cit., pp. 3–4.

⁶⁵ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid.

⁶⁶ [1] “Standard for Change Management.” The Association of Change Management Professionals, 2019. p. 25. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.acmpglobal.org/resource/resmgr/files/ACMP_Standard_2019_03_21.pdf [2] “How to Communicate Change to Stakeholders.” Brighter Strategies, November 13, 2015. <https://www.brighterstrategies.com/there-is-no-such-thing-as-too-much-communication-during-change/>

⁶⁷ “Successfully Implementing Transformational Change in Education: Lessons Learned About the Importance of Effective Change Leadership and Strategic Communications,” Op. cit., p. 2.

⁶⁸ “How to Communicate Change to Stakeholders,” Op. cit.

⁶⁹ “Standard for Change Management,” Op. cit., p. 25.

⁷⁰ [1] “6 Lessons for Leading Change in Schools,” Op. cit. [2] “Successfully Implementing Transformational Change in Education.” Battelle for Kids, 2011. p. 2. <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/communities/bfk-rttt-communications-lessons-learned.pdf>

⁷¹ “School Improvement Planning: A Handbook for Principals, Teachers, and School Counselors,” Op. cit., p. 48.

District communications regarding instructional initiatives should be accessible for all members of the community. Districts should publish materials in community members' preferred languages and consider literacy and access to technology when drafting communications.⁷² Personalizing messages based on the group helps to increase relevance and understanding.⁷³ Additionally, effective messages are concrete, specific, simple, repetitive, and targeted to different groups.⁷⁴ Figure 2.3 below summarizes essential features of a communication strategy for change management.

Figure 2.3: Effective Strategies for Communicating Organizational Changes

- ✓ Messaging that is appropriate to specific stakeholder audiences.
- ✓ Consistency in messaging reflecting the shared language of the community.
- ✓ Connections to broader district strategies, priorities, and expectations for outcomes.
- ✓ Communication that serves as a feedback loop, with avenues for both pushing information out and also hearing back from key constituencies.

Source: Minnesota Department of Education⁷⁵

Effective communications strategies use multiple communications formats, including email and district websites, as well as advertising, newsletters, and mailing, to maximize the reach of district communications. In addition to print communications, district leaders communicate in person with community members by hosting activities such as open houses and workshops.⁷⁶ District communication plans should specify the following aspects of changes due to improvement efforts, including detailing the planning, people, process, and performance (Figure 2.4, on the following page).⁷⁷

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "Successfully Implementing Transformational Change in Education," Op. cit., p. 2.





⁷⁴ [1] "6 Lessons for Leading Change in Schools," Op. cit. [2] "Successfully Implementing Transformational Change in Education," Op. cit., p. 2.

⁷⁵ Bullet points quoted verbatim with modification from: "Change Leadership - A Guide for School Leaders," Op. cit., p. 30.

⁷⁶ "Strategies for Community Engagement in School Turnaround," Op. cit., p. 10.

⁷⁷ "How to Communicate Change to Stakeholders," Op. cit.

Figure 2.4: Communication Plan Components

			
PLANNING	PEOPLE	PROCESS	PERFORMANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explain why the change will be implemented. ▪ Explain the purpose of the change. ▪ Describe the strategic objectives the change will help to meet. ▪ Create measurable objectives to determine whether or not the strategic objectives have been met. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List the relevant individuals working on the project. ▪ List any other relevant individuals or organizations (refer to list of internal and external stakeholders). ▪ List the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in the change management project, from most influential to least influential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe the project's scope, any changes occurring to the scope, and how the change management plan applies. ▪ List all of the steps necessary. ▪ Describe the process by which the change will be managed. ▪ Explain how internal process changes will affect an organization's external stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe any tools needed to implement the desired change. ▪ Document the new budget for implementing the project change. ▪ Perform a risk analysis for implementing any change in your project management plan. ▪ Create the change management schedule.

Source: Brighter Strategies⁷⁸

Similarly, school leaders should continually collect and examine student and school-level data to evaluate progress, and provide all stakeholders with regular progress updates. Celebrating improvement successes acknowledges progress and the work of school and community members and raises community morale.⁷⁹ The NYC Department of Education recommends that schools share the successes and failures of their school improvement framework with district leadership and other schools. Specific actions schools can take to share the lessons learned include:⁸⁰

- As a school community, ensure you capture your successes and failures in order to continuously learn. By comparing results to predicted outcomes, you gain insight into the factors at play. Wrong predictions are as valuable as correct ones;
- When changes you try have the intended impact on your success indicators, take time to consider how you will share this knowledge with other teams both within and outside your school. Use your weekly professional development and family engagement time. Expect your superintendent and field support center to share successful approaches; and
- It is also important to ensure that you communicate your challenges with this work to your superintendent so they can work with you to address the needs of your school and community.

⁷⁸ Figure contents quoted verbatim from: Ibid.

⁷⁹ "School Improvement Planning: A Handbook for Principals, Teachers, and School Counselors," Op. cit., p. 49.

⁸⁰ Bullet points quoted verbatim from: "A Vision for School Improvement: Applying the Framework for Great Schools," Op. cit., p. 5.