

SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL CAPACITY— WHAT WE KNOW

For the past two decades, educational researchers across the globe have expended massive effort attempting to uncover the school improvement equation. Literally hundreds of innovative approaches to school improvement, development, and revitalization have been created and implemented, encompassing the following range of widely used and well-known improvement approaches:

- Action learning, involving collaborative learning techniques, action research, and various forms of collegial learning circles
- School reculturing, involving values clarification and the development of school vision statements
- Coaching and mentoring, involving external experts and train-the-trainer strategies, usually in relation to school implementation of systemic priorities
- Cluster-based networking, involving district teams of school representatives sharing successes and needs
- Infrastructural design and reconstruction, involving the implementation of new facilities, technologies, and learning spaces

Some notable revitalization initiatives have in fact incorporated aspects of several of these approaches. Consider, for example, the ROUNDS Project (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) in the United States; Manitoba School Improvement Project in Canada (Earl, Torrance, Sutherland, Fullan, & Ali, 2003); Improving the Quality of Education for All Project (Hopkins, West, & Ainscow, 1996) in the United Kingdom; and the IDEAS Project in Australia (Crowther, Andrews, Dawson, & Lewis, 2001). All are laudatory for their originality, comprehensiveness, and clarity. All have been methodically developed, comprehensively implemented, and systematically evaluated. And yet, as Levin (2010) has stated recently, their influence on school achievement has been disappointingly limited, with the focus of many schools and systems still on maintenance, not improvement. And why, one might ask, would this not be the case? After all, school improvement as currently construed provides no guarantee of a return that is commensurate with the effort expended and no assurance of sustainability, even if short-term success is achieved. The resultant frustration for school leaders is understandably and predictably debilitating.

Which leads us directly to the concept of capacity building . . .

It was probably Peter Senge who first introduced capacity building into the organizational and management literature. In attempting in 1990 to demonstrate a logical link between the concepts of knowledge society and

organizational development, Senge asserted that two conditions must be met in the work of 21st-century organizations: first, the notion that the professional learning community must become accepted as integral to organizational development and, second, professional learning communities, once in operation, must accept that their core purpose involves the creation and sustainability of significant “new knowledge.”

It was out of these dual premises that the concept of educational capacity building was born. For, according to Senge, when the professional community of an organization such as a school creates significant “new knowledge,” and sets in place processes to ensure the ongoing refinement and dissemination of that knowledge, the organization’s “capacity” to achieve and sustain success is greatly enhanced.

In the two decades since Senge’s pioneering thinking, capacity building and its two key subordinate concepts—knowledge creation and professional learning community—have become fundamental organizational constructs. In education, the sequence of development as we see it can be linked to six key milestones.

Milestone one—1995—The idea that a school’s “capacity” influences the nature and quality of student learning was introduced into the educational literature in 1995 by University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage. Subsequently, Bruce King and Newmann (1999, pp. 1-4) undertook nationwide research that enabled them to assert that a school’s capacity to affect the quality of instruction in classrooms comprises four “dimensions”:

- Teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions
- Professional learning, focused on (a) a concentration on student learning, (b) collaborative planning and decision making, (c) sustained effort, and (d) teachers learning as a community
- Program coherence
- Technical resources

Newmann and Wehlage’s model is unique in the emphasis it places on teachers’ use of the four dimensions to enhance their core work—their pedagogy.

Milestone two—2001—The notion of “spheres of capacity” was developed by Canadian researchers Coral Mitchell and Larry Sackney. Their model is based on three “spheres,” which they assert must be developed concurrently if a school’s overall capacity is to be enhanced. The spheres are

- the personal sphere—in which individual professionals establish connections among their practices, values, and knowledge, via reflection;

Table 8.1 Key Questions for Educational Stakeholders in Assessing the Integrity of a School Improvement Process

Dynamic 1—Committing to revitalization
<p>Principal: Do I feel a deep personal attachment to the school's recent achievements (or claims of failure), and a sense of urgency to build and embed our successes?</p> <p>Teacher leaders: If a convincing values-based rationale for a school improvement process has been articulated by the principal, am I prepared to support it?</p> <p>System leaders: What must we do to ensure that the school's proposal for revitalization is linked to system priorities and expertise?</p>
Dynamic 2—Organizational diagnosis and coherence
<p>Principal: Am I engaging in discussion of the school's index of coherence without egotism, blame, or a thin skin?</p> <p>Teacher leaders: Does our school's report on our index of coherence (coherence) point out our achievements and needs in a "no blame" manner?</p> <p>System leaders: How can we ensure that resources and expertise are available to help correct misalignments identified in the school's self-diagnosis and subsequent index of coherence?</p>
Dynamic 3—Seeking new heights
<p>Principal: Do I publicly stand behind the school's vision and values, showing the courage of my convictions, and leading from the front?</p> <p>Teacher leaders: Are we pursuing elevated goals for our school through schoolwide pedagogical enhancement—with teacher leaders facilitating the process?</p> <p>System leaders: Are the school's vision and SWP consistent with the district's statement of purpose and core values?</p>
Dynamic 4—Micro-pedagogical deepening
<p>Principal: Do I facilitate schoolwide pedagogical deepening through support for teacher leadership?</p> <p>Teacher leaders: Are our professional learning processes assisting us to illuminate our individual gifts and talents in relation to our SWP and internationally acclaimed pedagogies?</p> <p>System leaders: How can the system deploy educational resources and expertise to contribute to pedagogical deepening initiatives in the school?</p>

(Continued)

Table A.1 Teachers as Leaders Framework**Teacher leaders . . .***Convey convictions about a better world by*

- articulating a positive future for all students
- contributing to an image of teaching as a profession that makes a difference

Facilitate communities of learning by

- encouraging a shared, schoolwide approach to core pedagogical processes
- approaching professional learning as consciousness-raising about complex issues
- synthesizing new ideas out of colleagues' professional discourse and reflective activities

Strive for pedagogical excellence by

- showing genuine interest in students' needs and well-being
- continuously developing and refining personal teaching gifts and talents
- seeking deep understanding of significant pedagogical practices

Confront barriers in the school's culture and structures by

- standing up for children, especially disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups
- working with administrators to find solutions to issues of equity, fairness, and justice
- encouraging student "voice" in ways that are sensitive to students' developmental stages and circumstances

Translate ideas into sustainable systems of action by

- working with the principal, administrators, and other teachers to manage projects that heighten alignment between the school's vision, values, pedagogical practices, and professional learning activities
- building alliances and nurturing external networks of support

Nurture a culture of success by

- acting on opportunities to emphasize accomplishments and high expectations
- encouraging collective responsibility in addressing schoolwide challenges
- encouraging self-respect and confidence in students' communities

(Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009, p. 3)