

Introduction

SMART Thinking for Critical Times

When we think about the complexity of the educational enterprise today and the growing demands on the resources and energy of educators, it's easy to see why people feel tugged and pulled in all directions. Consider the enormity of the task:

- **We must educate the whole child**—Assuring that children can read, write, and compute; know basic scientific facts and processes; are knowledgeable about history, geography, social, civic, and economic issues and events; learn and apply creative expression through art, music, and dance; and are physically, socially, and emotionally healthy.
- **We must attend to children's daily needs**—Feeding and transporting them, providing a safe environment in which to learn, disciplining them, teaching them, and even attending to their most basic physical needs when they are not yet skilled to do so for themselves.
- **We must prepare children for all possible futures**—Preparing them to be good workers, good parents, good citizens, and good selves. They need to learn technology skills, employment skills, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, organizational skills, communication, teamwork, and conflict-resolution skills.
- **We must meet the needs of all children**—Educating and caring for all the children who come to school representing a full spectrum of abilities, ages, attitudes, interests, economic conditions, and experiences, including those who speak different languages and come from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- **We must meet the needs of multiple stakeholders with differing expectations**—Satisfying the needs and desires of parents, grandparents, community members, social service agency employees, politicians, journalists, those in higher education and business, and taxpayers.
- **We must be accountable to our government**—Meeting the continuous onslaught of new initiatives and requirements that come from state and federal mandates (mostly unfunded) whether we believe they are in the best interests of the children or not.

When these demands are viewed collectively, it's no wonder educators feel as though they are under attack. It's also a testament to educational practices that we have been able to accomplish as much as we have considering the enormity of the challenge. But the list also demonstrates why there is growing interest in find-

ing new and better ways to educate our children. The ability to meet these demands—and do them *all* well, at the same time, for a sustainable period—is well beyond the capacity of most current educational systems.

In recent years, however, some schools and districts across the country have discovered new ways to work together that fundamentally increase their capacity to learn and grow. This book is about some of these practical methods and tools that allow districts, schools, and educators at all levels to better serve their students and communities.

The Key: Linking Learning and Improvement

The principles that underlie all of the approaches described in this book are simple:

- Make *learning* something that an entire school does.
- Apply that learning to achieve continuous *improvement*.

To some people, continuous improvement in education means that test scores go up every year. That is one way to look at it, but it is just a small part of the picture.

In its broadest sense, continuous improvement is a state of mind, the belief that no matter what I do well, there's a way to do it better next time. When we think this way, everything we do is fair game. Improvement becomes something that applies to both things our schools are currently doing poorly *and* things we think we are doing well.

The only way to continuously improve is to continuously come up with new and better ideas that can be shown to produce better results. And the only way to come up with those ideas is through learning.

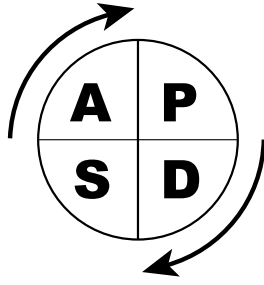


Figure 1 PDSA Wheel

Nothing is more motivating and energizing for a group of educators than learning something new and useful—especially if what’s learned has potential impact on their teaching and children’s learning. Learning happens when

- Theory and practice interact
- Past experience and new knowledge meet
- Data confirm or negate perceptions
- Separate, isolated events or facts emerge into patterns, trends, or new ideas
- Two or more individuals’ creative potentials collide

The link between learning and improvement is illustrated by a model called PDSA that is commonly used to implement a continuous improvement process:

PLAN a change or action.

DO the change or action (on a small scale at first).

STUDY the results to learn what did and did not work.

ACT by refining the idea or by implementing it on a broader scale.

PDSA is most often depicted as a wheel (see Figure 1), to capture the idea that learning is ongoing.

First developed by Dr. Walter Shewhart and later adapted and taught by Dr. W. Edwards Deming, PDSA is a process of learning by trying out approaches on a small scale, reflecting on the results, and then either abandoning the approach if it does not work well or institutionalizing it if it does.

You will find PDSA thinking embedded throughout this book. It influences everything from how to hold effective meetings (p. 59) to making process improvements (p. 181) and developing school improvement plans (p. 204). When an entire school community is thinking PDSA, learning and improvement become second nature. Successes are quickly implemented on a broad scale so that all can benefit from the new methods or approaches; mistakes are seen as learning by “failing forward,” another op-

You don’t just learn knowledge; you have to create it. Get in the driver’s seat, don’t just be a passenger. You have to contribute to it or you don’t understand it.

—Dr. W. Edwards Deming

portunity to do better the next time around. With PDSA, schools can move rapidly up the learning curve to understand how and why progress is (or is not) being made.

A SMART Way of Thinking

Believing that learning and improvement should be explicitly linked is one thing; finding tools and methods that let you act on that belief is entirely different. SMART goals are very effective tools for making this translation. These goals are

Strategic and Specific

Measurable

Attainable

Results-based

Time-bound

Strategic goals are linked to strategic priorities that are part of a larger vision of success for the entire school district (see also Chapter 10). *Strategic and specific* means that these goals will have both broad-based and long-term impact because they are focused on the specific needs of the students for whom the goal is intended.

Measurable means being able to know whether actions made the kind of difference we wanted: being able to measure a change in results because of those actions. Measurement can and should occur in a number of different ways using a variety of different tools and strategies. Seeing results across measurements that yield consistent patterns gives us greater confidence that our actions truly have made a difference.

A goal needs to be *attainable*: within the realm of our influence or control, and doable given current resources. To know whether a goal is attainable, you must know your starting point (baseline), how much time you have to accomplish the goal, and what kinds of resources you have to make the necessary changes. Setting a goal that is attainable then becomes an art of balancing the degree of stretch that will make the goal compelling without making it unattainable.

SMART goals are *results-based*: aimed at specific outcomes that can be measured or observed. Results-based goals define not only *what is expected*, but they also communicate a *desired end point*. Results could come in the form of student achievement in a particular area, a percentage of students who improve in a certain area, or as a demonstration of learning that can be defined and measured. (Refer to page 226 for more information on results versus process goals.)

Team Charter	
Team Members (List all members.):	
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Mission (A brief statement of purpose that includes specific end results or outcomes.):	
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Tasks to Complete (A sequential list of activities that the team will use to achieve the end results/outcomes provided in the mission.):	Timeline (Either phases or a specific timeline that the group will follow to achieve its mission. Ad hoc groups will most likely have a stated date for completion; ongoing groups will have a timeline that targets incremental progress within specified time ranges.):
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Figure 3.1 Team Charter