Strategies to Build Leadership Team Capacity on Continuous Improvement and Intensive Interventions

Overview

The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) seeks to build the capacity of local education agencies (LEAs) and school leadership teams to meet the needs of struggling students. Research demonstrates that “school leadership could be an important lever for school improvement strategies pursued by states and districts”. In addition, a synthesis of research on conditions associated with student success suggests that school leadership models, where staff share leadership roles with the principal, may improve student achievement more than a leadership model where decisions are largely made by the principal alone. Given the FDOE goal of addressing the needs of struggling students and the role school leadership teams play in this work it is important to define the support and capacity building needed at the school leadership level. In this brief, the R7CC provides considerations for capacity building strategies FDOE can use to support school leadership teams.

FODE also has a commitment to helping schools select evidence-based strategies in the context of a continuous improvement model as described in the state guidance document, Schoolwide Improvement Plan: Evidence-based Strategies. Though the selection of evidence-based interventions will vary at the local level based on district/school context and needs, there are strategies that can support and build the capacity of school leadership teams to effectively implement interventions with fidelity, which is key to improving student outcomes. The R7CC has identified several resources that may be helpful to FODE as it seeks to define the capacity building supports to provide school leadership teams to improve instructional supports.

An assumption of this brief is that Florida schools already have functioning leadership teams in place that have been developed based on best practices. If this is not the case, it may be of greater importance and priority to first focus on defining the necessary capacity building supports for LEAs and schools to develop well-functioning leadership teams prior to providing support to build capacity of leadership teams to effectively implement other strategies. Ensuring schools have highly functioning collaborative leadership teams can be one of the most powerful strategy for improving instruction.

Researchers suggest that the identification and examination of practices from schools...
and districts that are “beating the odds” or “positive outliers” (high-performing schools successfully increasing student achievement for high needs students) may be helpful to determine how they are exceeding expectations for student achievement. A review of research on these high-performers yields a focus on capacity building of school leadership teams to effectively implement evidence-based interventions. Each of these high-performers have many interconnected components that contribute to their success. Two strategies, in particular, stand out as important to the effective implementation of any school-level intervention targeted to support struggling learners. They are:

- building school leadership teams’ capacity to apply a continuous improvement planning process and
- using intensive team-based interventions within a continuous improvement process.

These strategies are also relevant to the FDOE continuous improvement guidance, Schoolwide Improvement Plan: Evidence-based Strategies. There may be potential to build on the guidance by developing and providing additional supports related to strategies it promotes; this may assist school leadership teams to operate effectively and implement any evidence-based intervention with fidelity.

The following two sections introduce resources related to these two continuous improvement strategies that could be used to frame additional capacity building supports for school leadership teams in Florida.

### Building school leadership team capacity to effectively utilize continuous improvement planning processes

It is critical for LEAs and schools to utilize continuous improvement planning processes as a systematic way to plan for, implement, and refine the use of evidence-based interventions. Districts that are identified as positive outliers use assessments and data to monitor the effectiveness of programs and interventions to support continuous improvement. Research also finds high performing districts are effectively using systems for continuous improvement to improve instruction and student outcomes.

Research suggests, however, that many LEAs do not have a clear continuous improvement process plan or approach making it a challenge to put it into practice. Some approaches focus more on measuring outcomes without attention to “actual processes for improvement, the means for measuring system outcomes, and how all of these processes may actually function across a district.” It takes time and proficient leadership skills for teams to learn how to work together and use continuous improvement activities.

The following resources might be helpful in framing some of the ways in which SEAs can support LEAs and school leadership teams in applying continuous improvement cycles. They are presented in alphabetical order.

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4. “These schools are typically identified by comparing observed performance on an exam, such as a state assessment exam, with expected performance based on demographic characteristics, including the percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged (proxied by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch), as a racial/ethnic minority, or as an English language learner.” (Koon, Petscher, Foorman., 2006, p. 1)
8. Burns et al. (2009) Closing the opportunity gap: How positive outlier districts in California are pursuing equitable access to deeper learning.
Advancing Student Learning Through Distributed Instructional Leadership: A Toolkit for High School Leadership Teams

Abstract: This toolkit is designed to support school leaders build and leverage distributed instructional leadership teams to improve student learning. The toolkit is an outgrowth of a three-year partnership between the Wisconsin Urban Schools Leadership Project at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and 16 high schools in Wisconsin. Through this partnership, a number of tools were developed and used by school leaders to guide the formation and facilitation of distributed instructional leadership teams. These tools are organized around three key phases of work related to distributed instructional leadership teams:

- defining a shared vision
- building the capacity of leaders and leadership teams
- mobilizing distributed leadership to analyze problems and develop solutions using the best data available

The resources in this toolkit can be used independently and/or customized to meet a specific school’s context and needs. While the toolkit was designed through a partnership with high schools, the resulting tools are reflective of best practices for distributed instructional leadership teams in elementary, middle, and high schools.

Examples of some of the tools are the following:

- Audit Tool: Advancing Equity and Excellence in Student Learning,
- Addressing the Needs of Low, Middle, and High Achieving Students Discussion Guide,
- Professional Learning Communities Assessment Tool—Revised (PLCA–R),
- Develop Testable Hypotheses,
- Use Promising Practices to Address Common Problems,
- Leverage Distributed Leadership to Shape, Implement, and Refine Promising Practices.

Application to FDOE: The state could use this information to develop guidance and training opportunities to build capacity for effective teams. As stated in the overview, in order for a school leadership team to effectively implement interventions as intended and utilize continuous improvement planning process, the teams themselves need to be well structured, organized, and functional. This resource provides some concrete planning tips for structuring leadership teams. This resource also includes helpful tips and tools for creating a data driven decision–making culture within a leadership team, critical to building capacity for continuous improvement planning.

**Best Practices for School Improvement Planning**

**Abstract:** In this report, Hanover Research examines school improvement and continuous improvement planning processes in K–12 education, identifying the most essential components according to best practices research and well-tested models. These essential components include, among others, an initial needs assessment, data-driven decision-making, and feasible goals and benchmarks. Hanover Research also examines effective methods for structuring school and district leadership during school improvement initiatives and presents instruments for monitoring improvement according to academic achievement, behavior, and social–emotional learning (SEL) indicators. Lastly, Hanover Research identifies and describes effective improvement models.

**Application to FDOE:** The state could utilize the information in this toolkit to further identify guidance and trainings for LEA and school leadership teams, particularly around the steps of continuous improvement outlined in the FDOE guidance document. Additional guidance about organizational practices and models of improvement may be helpful when considering the structures that are needed to effectively build the capacity of leadership teams to implement continuous improvement processes.

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**Continuous Improvement in Schools and Districts: Policy Considerations**

**Abstract:** Discussions about improving public education often focus on outcomes without considering how schools and districts can accomplish those outcomes. Research shows that using a continuous improvement process has proven successful in healthcare, manufacturing, and technology, and may hold potential for use in education as well. This brief defines and describes the continuous improvement process and looks at the policy considerations for using such a process in education to help schools, districts, and systems achieve higher levels of reliable performance. Policy considerations for adapting and using continuous improvement processes in education are discussed: (a) addressing problems more effectively by focusing on fewer, and more specific, goals, (b) creating system flexibility that allows for rapid prototyping of potential solutions, (c) planning for ongoing evaluation of programs that allows for midcourse corrections, and (d) development of school and district leaders trained in formal improvement methodology.

**Application to FDOE:** This document likely does not contain information FDOE does not already know about continuous improvement. It may, however, have value to serve as a primer to share with those at the LEA or school level for information regarding the importance of incorporating continuous improvement into their practices. There are also key recommendations for SEA policymakers at the end of the document that might be useful in considering how to promote continuous improvement in LEAs and schools.

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The Ohio Improvement Process

Abstract: The Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) is an example of a SEA utilizing its continuous improvement framework (The Five Step Process) to build educator capacity through an instructional leadership team approach. Utilizing the Five Step Process LEAs are provided with a tool that includes, but goes well beyond, the traditional plan–do–study–act (PDSA) cycle. When viewed as an organizational strategy, rather than an exercise in compliance, the OIP gives districts a template through which focused and intentional action can take place. It brings educators together through collaborative team structures to learn from each other, and it facilitates communication and decision-making between and across levels of the system (district, central office, school, grade levels, content areas, classrooms). The team structures at the core of the OIP form peer-to-peer networks, giving more people a voice and allowing for the inclusion of multiple perspectives in guiding each district’s journey toward organizational learning and continuous improvement.

Application to FDOE: The state can reference Ohio’s utilization of implementation science and team based instructional leadership as a model. Ohio’s Five Step Processes also includes a common protocol and template to support school improvement and instructional decision making based on data. FDOE could consider providing similar resources to build on the current guidance provided for steps for continuous improvement.

RAND School Leadership Intervention Evaluation Toolkit

Abstract: This toolkit is a companion to another document RAND produced, School Leadership Interventions Under Every Student Succeeds Act: An Evidence Review, which assessed the evidence on school leadership interventions against Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) evidence tiers. The authors developed this toolkit to help state and local education policymakers evaluate the implementation of school leadership intervention outcomes with lower or uncertain levels of evidence. This toolkit is designed primarily for administrators working in SEAs and LEAs considering school leadership improvement interventions as a school improvement lever. Included are guidance and tools for building an intervention logic model, selecting program evaluation designs and measures, organizing and analyzing data, and using data to improve the intervention. The guidance shared in this toolkit is consistent with the larger body of evaluation methodology and may be adapted for other areas of educational program evaluation but is specifically tailored to be relevant for school leadership intervention evaluations.

Application to FDOE: The state could utilize the information in this toolkit to further identify guidance and trainings for LEA and school leadership teams, particularly around implementation evaluation and process measures as a part of their continuous improvement efforts related to implementation of program interventions.
Building LEAs instructional leadership team capacity to effectively utilize data to make informed instructional decisions

Intensive team-based intervention is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. It is imperative to take inventory of the local context in order to provide the appropriate intervention(s) to reach the best outcomes for student growth and achievement. LEAs can utilize the RAND School Leadership Intervention Evaluation Toolkit mentioned above to help determine if the intervention(s) the LEA is deciding to utilize is both evidence-based and if it is a correct fit for their student population and needs.

Students who require intensive intervention traditionally have the most persistent and severe learning and behavioral challenges and those who teach them need a high level of specialized expertise. By working within teacher-based instructional leadership teams, schools can build the capacity of those providing the intense interventions and those who provide the secondary interventions through the successful implementation of evidence-based programs and strategies in the classroom.

Utilizing data within an instructional leadership team approach to drive student grouping, intervention levels, instructional decision making, and evidence-based strategies will not only increase the capacity of school as a community to serve students, it will also help to provide a more targeted and efficient approach towards personalizing instruction to match student needs.

Intensive interventions should be conceptualized as a process, not a product. The following tools will support such a process for designing and delivering intensive interventions. Similar to the cyclical process used for continuous improvement, data-based decision-making, ongoing learning, planning, implementation, reflection, and refinement are essential to effectively design and deliver intensive interventions for struggling students.18 The Increased pressure on schools to meet accountability targets for all students utilizing data to inform approaches can help districts to ensure that every student receives the education they deserve. The following tools can be utilized to determine rigor, provide a sense of relevance, and bring structure and accountability to LEAs instructional leadership teaming practices. They are presented in suggested order of review; the first resource is foundational to the other two.

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Implementing Intense Interventions: Lessons Learned from the Field

Abstract: The purpose of this document is to present findings from an exploratory study of how five high-performing districts defined and implemented intensive intervention. NCII’s approach to intensive intervention is grounded in the concept of data-based individualization (DBI), a systematic method for using assessment data to determine when and how to intensify interventions in reading, mathematics, and behavior. DBI relies on the systematic and frequent collection and analysis of student-level data, modification of intervention components when those data indicate inadequate response, and use of teachers’ clinical experience and judgment, combined with a knowledge of evidence-based practice, to individualize intervention. DBI is typically implemented within the context of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), such as response to intervention (RTI) or Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). DBI is an iterative, multi-step process that involves the analysis of progress-monitoring and diagnostic assessment data, followed by individualization of a validated academic or behavioral intervention program.

Application to FDOE: The state can use this document to express why it is necessary to utilize an organized approach to implement intensive interventions. The findings from this study reflect themes that emerged from an analysis of all five districts and related factors that facilitated or created challenges in the implementation of intensive intervention. The findings may offer lessons that LEAs can learn from when planning for, implementing, and working to sustain their own initiatives to provide intensive intervention for students with the most severe and persistent learning and/or behavioral needs.19


Data-Based Individualization Training Module

Abstract: This training module provides a rationale for intensive intervention and an overview of data-based individualization (DBI), NCII’s approach to providing intensive intervention. DBI is a research-based process for individualizing validated interventions through the systematic use of assessment data to determine when and how to intensify intervention. Two case studies, one academic and one behavioral, are used to illustrate the process and highlight considerations for implementation. The module is intended to be delivered by a trained, knowledgeable professional and includes a PowerPoint presentation with speaker notes and handouts. A coaching guide intended for coaches supporting school or district implementation of DBI is also included and provides suggested activities to support the understanding and application of training content.

Application to FDOE: The state could utilize these training models to help support LEAs’ implementation of Data-Based Individualization as an intense instructional intervention training for all teachers and instructional leadership teams.
Designing and Delivering Intensive Interventions: A teacher’s toolkit

Abstract: This toolkit will facilitate the design and delivery of research-based intensive interventions. It is based on the Center on Instruction’s publication, Intensive Interventions for Students Struggling in Reading and Mathematics: A Practice Guide. Readers may find it helpful to review the Practice Guide when preparing to use this toolkit. The tools provide both important information from the Practice Guide and broad guidance to help practitioners learn about, plan for, implement, reflect on, and refine their delivery of intensive interventions. Because this toolkit offers broad guidance in each of these areas, teachers may find it helpful in guiding their team-based approaches. This toolkit includes the following resources:

- a professional development activity that illustrates how to intensify instructional delivery within interventions,
- an intervention planning worksheet that (a) guides practitioners through recommendations and considerations for intensifying interventions and (b) asks practitioners to record specific actions they will use to intensify interventions,
- a lesson reflection template for teachers to reflect on the instruction they provided during a particular intervention session and outline improvements for subsequent sessions, and
- a matrix of supplemental resources that practitioners can consult to extend learning about particular aspects of intensive interventions.20

Application to FDOE: The state could provide this document as guidance for LEAs to implement intense instructional intervention practices through an instructional teaming approach.