Professional Practices

For the 21st Century Leader

School Improvement

About the Author

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The focus for this month's **Professional Practices for the 21st Century Leader** is Standard 10 of the **Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015**: **School Improvement**. My 25 years of experience as a teacher, principal, director, and mother have reinforced the belief that the vast majority of us in the field of educational leadership are passionately interested in improving the lives of *all* students in our care. **The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders** compel education leaders to approach every decision based on what is best for the students in our care. At the end of each day I reflect on two essential questions:

- Did I make a difference today for our students?
- Did I focus on what matters most for their learning and their well-being?

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015

- **Mission, Vision, and Core Values**
- **Ethics and Professional Norms**
- **Equity and Cultural Responsiveness**
- **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**
- **Community of Care and Support for Students**
- **Professional Capacity of School Personnel**
- **Professional Community for Teachers and Staff**
- **Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community**
- **Operations and Management**

- **School Improvement**
  Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Yesterday & Today...
Where We've Been and Where We're Going

School Improvement

Establish goals at start of year and visit again at the end of the year	Use methods of continuous improvement to fulfill the mission and promote core values
Solicit staff to assist with plan compliance	Promote readiness for improvement by building mutual commitment and accountability
Share plan with staff and assume buy-in	Develop knowledge, skills, and motivation to succeed in improvement efforts
System goals and strategies set at the district and flow to the school; Leader tells staff and evaluates at end of the year	Engage with others in ongoing evidence-based inquiry, strategic goal setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation of improvement efforts
Manage multiple improvement efforts, even if seemingly at odds	Adopt a systems perspective and promote coherence among improvement efforts
Implement what was asked by district leadership and departments	Manage uncertainty, risk, competing initiatives, and politics of change with courage and perseverance

Access Yesterday & Today graphics at www.justaskpublications.com/ areas-of-focus/instructional-leadership/

The school improvement debate has long centered on low-performing schools where the entire school needs to be turned in a new direction. However, what about the higher-performing school with 40% of its Hispanic population meeting reading proficiency or 28% of students with a disability meeting math standards, or the gifted students who don't meet mastery in science? What about the school with decades of top performance with a small number of students not meeting standards? Don't we want to use school improvement planning to uncover why, set goals to get to mastery, and get there? Of course we do! **No Child Left Behind (NCLB)** required leaders to look at every child as individuals and as groups and not just at the total school, making the practice of continuous improvement for all learners. Now, **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** allows schools greater flexibility to determine the most effective interventions and improvement initiatives. Still, the idea of continuous improvement is pointed at all schools, all classrooms, and all students. There is no easy or quick fix, but the urgency is clear. We need to collect meaningful and varied data to uncover barriers; determine synergistic goals and measures; and get to it - our students are waiting!

What's a Principal to Do? Learning from My Mistakes!

The topic of school improvement has been covered extensively in scholarly articles, journals, and books. Like you, I have read many of these; some approaches and tactics stuck with me and I incorporated them into my repertoire, adjusting and improving with each implementation. The notion of a continuous cycle of improvement applied to teaching and learning is one that has stuck with me and grown over years of implementation. While leading school centers and districts to improved outcomes for students, there were a few bumps, if not potholes, in the road that, hopefully you can avoid. Here are a few tips gleaned from what I experienced on my journey:

Tip 1: Know the difference between improvement planning and the improvement plan
School improvement planning is the process through which schools set goals for improvement, and make decisions about how and when the goals will be achieved. A school improvement plan is a road map that sets out changes a school needs to make to improve the level of student achievement, and shows how and when these changes will be made. The plan is a tool to move the needle on performance and should be front and center of every budget, staff, curriculum, instruction, and assessment decision you make. It isn't a compliance document that is shelved and dusted off when end-of-the-year data arrive.

Tip 2: Don't delegate the improvement planning or the improvement plan
Certainly involving teachers, students, parents, and community in the planning process and plan development is critical to establish buy-in and understanding of goals and objectives. I have seen many school leaders delegate the planning and the plan to their assistant principals. I think that's a mistake. Sometimes our state timelines for planning and plan submission make collaboration challenging because the standardized data often arrive in the summer months. Having your team already established and ready to roll as a group, not as individuals is a good approach. There is pre-work you and the assistant principal can do to help get the process moving, but not the planning and the plan. The time for delegation is in implementing the plan, evaluating the plan, and adjusting the plan.

Tip 3: Use a protocol or model for school improvement
Don't make up your own! Many states and districts have a model they prefer. Most states and districts have a practice of requiring those schools receiving federal funds complete school improvement plans. This practice is one of compliance with Title I and says to non-Title I schools that they don't have areas for improvement. Wrong! Unless and until you have a 100% graduation rate and 100% on state tests by 100% of the students, all schools need improvement. I found in all cases non-Title I schools have gaps in their students' learning that can and must be addressed, but because they aren't at risk of being labeled a "priority" school, the spotlight of school improvement isn't directed on them.

Tip 4: Not all data are the same

Standardized test data give you a snapshot in time of a student's learning. These data are vital for examining alignment, charting progress over time, comparisons, and must be a major factor in your school improvement planning. While designed to be cumulative, its summative nature, and often late arrival, isn't terribly useful in day-to-day monitoring of progress. Data that are equally useful and get at the qualitative aspects of improvement include:

Data Sources Beyond Standardized Tests

- State summative assessments (examined by subject, grade level, teacher, student)
- Student demographics
- Student suspensions
- Student (and teacher) attendance both absences and tardies
- Student behavior including frequency and type as well as teacher office referral rates
- Homework completion rates common Mini-assessments
- AP participation rates and performance rates (examined by ethnicity and gender)
- Classroom formative assessments

- Report card grades
- Level of participation in extra-curricular activities
- Kinds of student recognition and awards
- Surveys of staff, students, parents
- Teacher evaluation patterns and trends
- Numbers of books checked out from the library
- Enrollment trends
- Languages spoken in the home
- Teacher turnover
- Student mobility

Tip 5: Identify the right barrier

In the first issue of *Professional Practices for the 21st Century Leader*, I discussed the use of the **Five Whys** and the **Fishbone Diagram** to help get to root causes. (www.justaskpublications.com/ccltemplates) Identifying the right barrier(s) can be a time consuming exercise, but it one that is so important to effective identification of priority areas from which improvement goals are drafted and funded. Don't rush this and keep an open mind to possible barriers.
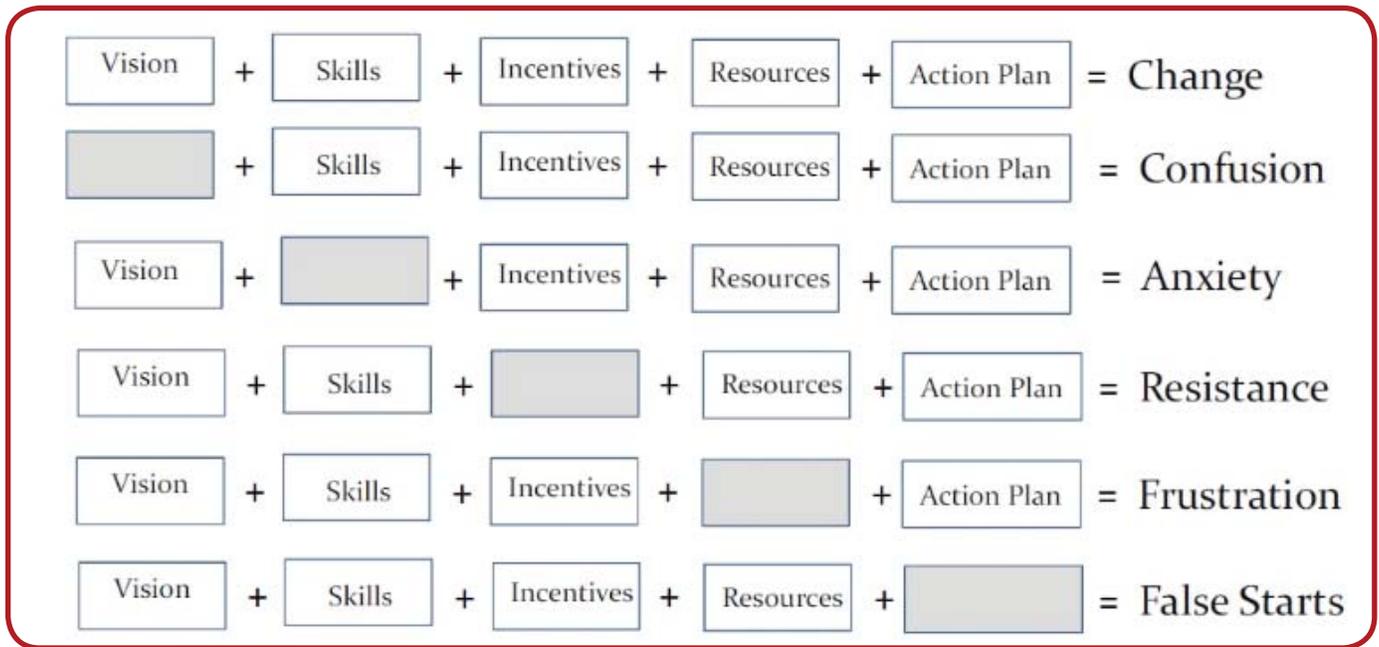
Tip 6: Be strategic and look for synergy

It is easy to get caught up in looking for the one best program that pushes student achievement to new heights. No matter what you are told and who tells you, know that there is no program that can replace high quality standards-based teaching and leading. To build synergy, look for commonalities across departments and grades to implement. For example, student data binders/notebooks can be a school-wide approach to increased engagement and ownership, even if it was a strategy initiated by the math department. Implementing new strategies across classrooms helps students connect. Having school-wide strategies also builds a common culture and can improve achievement.

Tip 7: Manage the change

A Framework for Thinking about Systems Change

Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Change
▓▓▓	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Confusion
Vision	+	▓▓▓	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Anxiety
Vision	+	Skills	+	▓▓▓	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Resistance
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	▓▓▓	+	Action Plan	=	Frustration
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	▓▓▓	=	False Starts

Adapted from T. Knoster, R. Villa, and J. Thousand. "A Framework for Thinking about Systems Change." R. Villa and J. Thousand, eds. *Restructuring for Caring and Effective Education: Piecing the Puzzle Together*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2000.

The graphic above has hung over my desk for the past 15 years. I have shared it with others and am reminded of it whenever I see an action, initiative, or change isn't moving forward despite our hard work and effort. I look along the right side to see if I can identify the variable I am seeing or hearing. I then can look across to the darkened box to see the missing element and where I need to place emphasis.

Baldrige Framework

The Baldrige Framework is described in *Charting Your Course: Lessons Learned During the Journey Toward Performance Excellence* by John Conyers and Robert Ewy is an excellent tool for presenting real life case studies in K-12 education and walking you through the processes of implementing the model in meaningful ways. A short video featuring the **Baldrige Total Quality Tools** in action at Sherwood Elementary School in Montgomery County, Maryland, where staff and leaders used the tools to get students engaged in their own learning with data notebooks and other classroom strategies is available at www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/baldrige/about/classroom.aspx

Montgomery County Schools, Maryland, has dedicated resources to the creation of an online support called, Data Centers in classrooms. There are elementary examples and secondary examples available at www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/baldrige/staff/datacenters.shtm.
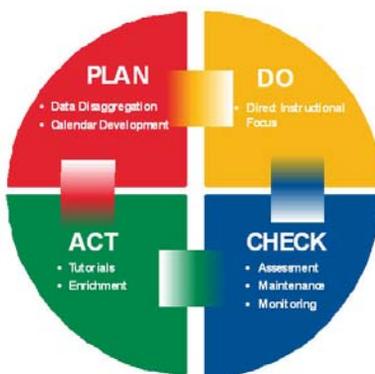
Plan - Do - Check - Act

Diagram used by Broward County Schools, Florida

Closing the Achievement Gap: No Excuses by Patricia Davenport and Gerald Anderson is a small and powerful book; it provides a case study about Brazosport Independent School District, Texas, closed its achievement gap through deliberate planning and action. The diverse school district dramatically improved the performance and outcomes for its students by applying an **8-Step Continuous Improvement Model (CIM)**. This model was combined with **Deming's Total Quality Management Model (P-D-C-A)** illustrated here.

Plan

Data Disaggregation
In this step administrators and teachers analyze the state standardized test data to identify students' and teachers' strengths and weaknesses. Focusing on specific student weaknesses, the teachers and administrators create a plan for student improvement. Looking at teacher weaknesses can help identify knowledge of skill deficits and target professional growth.

Timeline Development
Based on the students' strengths and weaknesses, teams build an instructional calendar that includes all standards/skills to be assessed. It is recommended and wise that each grade level focus on the same standard at the same time so that a trend analysis can be captured. The calendar should be flexible enough to allow for adjustments thus providing additional time for students to obtain mastery. The calendar should also clearly allocate time for assessment periods, enrichment and tutorials.

Do

Instructional Focus
Based on the timeline development, teachers teach the targeted skill and standard. The goal here is quality instruction and student mastery. Learning experiences are focused and conducive to learning when they:
- Provide a warm-up
- Highlight the focus
- Focus on new content
- Reinforce new concepts
- Assess student understanding

Teaching Strategies and High Expectations
Quality teaching strategies for instruction have at their core consistently high-level expectations and include:
- Modeling thinking processes
- Providing essential vocabulary instruction
- Making real world connections
- Using cooperative learning techniques
- Using skill reinforcing strategies
- Teaching test-taking strategies
- Celebrating mastery of skills and knowledge

Check

Assessment

After teaching the targeted standard, teachers administer short on-going assessments aligned to the benchmarks and integrated into the curriculum that check for student understanding.

- The assessment should, at times, mimic the format of the state assessment. You want the students to have a chance to experience the taught skills in exactly the way they will use them in a real testing situation. If technology will be used in the spring testing, use it throughout the year to build student's confidence, skill, and knowledge with this type of platform. Highlighting, dropping and dragging are sometimes required for students in third grade and some have never used these skills before. They shouldn't be tricked by a test format because we didn't show them how!
- Teacher teams, departments, and grade levels should meet frequently to review assessment results.
- Administrators should gather the data to analyze for trends. An item analysis should be conducted to study the students' areas of weaknesses. This will provide useful information to design the tutorial/enrichment activities.
- Do not use the assessment data as part of student grades. This concept was hugely controversial; however, these assessments are simply are a check of the students understanding of a specific skill that was taught for a specified time period.
- These assessments guide immediate instruction to get all students to mastery.
- At all grade levels; share the results with the students. The students need to know this information so that they may plan for tutorial opportunities.

Tools you can use can be found in chapter VI of **Creating a Culture for Learning**. Key data sources put through a filter of cause/effect or root cause can lead to productive data analysis and conversations. Check out that chapter and these tools online at www.justaskpublications.com/ccltemplates.

Act

- Based on assessment results, teachers provide continuing quality instruction to either build on success or provide additional instruction.
- Teaching teams will work together to review progress.
- Extensions must be considered as important as tutorial work and provided for both mastery and non-mastery students.
- Additional mini-assessments may be given to check for continued mastery.

Strategy Alert
The Instructional Focus Calendar

The **Instructional Focus Calendar** is not a lesson plan nor is it a scope and sequence. It is a guide that tells teachers what objectives will be taught during a particular week. It ensures that every standard on the state assessment will be covered in the classroom. It helps align the written curriculum with the taught curriculum and with the tested curriculum. Every staff member, whether or not they teach core content classes, checks the calendar to be sure they are purposeful in reinforcing the concepts being studied during that time period.

The **Instructional Focus Calendar**
- Is created in communicate a shared understanding of what it is students need to know and do and how much time is needed to teach/learn so that they know and can do it.
- Places the instructional focus squarely where attention is needed the most.
- Is created by teams of teachers
- Is shared across the entire campus where it is integrated into every teacher's instructional framework.

The Instructional Focus Calendar
- Is a work in progress
- Should be adjusted to allow for more or less time to cover a targeted area
- Covers each of the standards on the state assessment with additional time for the areas students struggle most
- Ensures that all standards are taught prior to state testing

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Historical Notes
- There are multiple approaches to developing an **Instructional Focus Calendar**; our teachers used the one described below.

  - After crossing out days not available for instructing because of holidays or workdays, our teams divided the number of standards into the number of instructional days between the opening of school and the start of state testing.
  - Based on our student's needs and our knowledge of the standards, we allocated amounts of time to teach each standard.
  - We then scheduled the order of the standards taught from weakest to strongest and concentrated in areas where students were having the greatest difficulty and needed the most time to teach and learn then moved to areas more easily mastered.
  - We were careful to include days for mini-assessments and reteaching/enrichment.
  - We built in ample review time before testing for any standards that seemed shaky.
- One year, we reviewed our student performance data in ELA and found that nearly all eighth graders scored lowest in inference. When we did some checking we realized that we taught inference in May, a month after the state test. Wow! It wasn't fair that we adults made the error in planning and judgment to not expose our

students to something they would be held responsible for on the state assessment. We never made that mistake again!

- I held quarterly data chats with teachers to ensure that the goals for the school were being met. It is at these chats, that valuable information was shared to identify needed adjustments to the **Instructional Focus Calendar**.
- Teachers easily rallied around the **Instructional Focus Calendar** and began to assign common problems of the day and common strategies of the week. That calendar and the state standards were always at our fingertips when planning or looking at data. I even carried them as I visited classrooms to help my progress monitoring! We soon found other uses for the calendars including frontloading our tutorials. Instead of remediating student weaknesses in our tutorials after the standard was taught, we used the calendars to give needier students background knowledge and vocabulary before standards were taught next week. What a confidence builder!

The Bottom Line
The School Improvement Plan should be used for planning and as the measuring stick for progress throughout the year.

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