

Leading change in your school: A sustainable process

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Schools are constantly changing - students change, families change, the community changes, expectations change, and the context in which the schools' function changes.

Our work helping schools grow, strengthen and improve helped us develop the BASE model to describe the school improvement process, which we describe in detail in our book, *Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Leaders* (2nd edn.) (2018). We chose BASE because everything you do to improve rigour must be built on a solid base, one that reflects research and best practice, builds support among teachers and families, and includes solid measures for success.

The four stages of our BASE model reflect a commitment to continuous improvement.

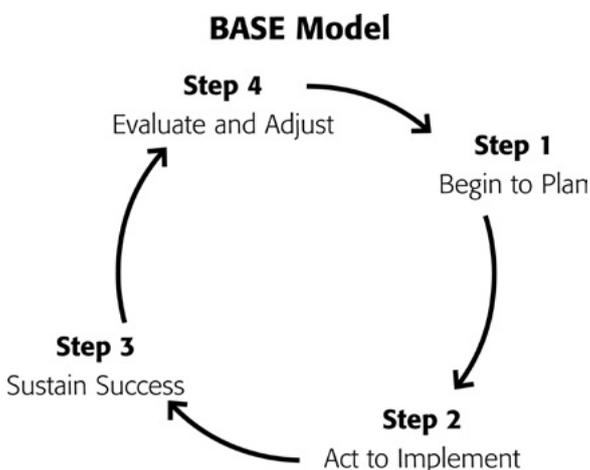


Figure 1: Base Model
Source: Williamson and Blackburn (2017).

Our model is organised to provide four clear steps you can use to work with teachers, families, and community to achieve your vision for your school. The process is circular and is built on an assumption that to nurture and sustain improvements in rigour, you must continuously examine how you've done. This analysis in turn helps identify other ways you can make your school more rigorous.

Step 1: Begin to plan

As you begin to think about planning, we want to emphasise the importance of using an inclusive process to make your vision a reality. We've discovered that involving others in planning is one of the most important tools. It allows people to develop collaborative skills, and to learn and grow together. Hearing different points of view can help assure that what is planned is most appropriate for your school.

There are also other critical aspects of the planning process that support your effort to improve your school, such as determining who to involve, agreeing on a vision or mission, determining a process for decision-making, and deciding on methods for sharing information.

Determining who to involve

Deciding whom to involve in a project is critical. If people have a stake in the outcome of the decision, they should be represented. Be sure to involve those who have the needed expertise. If a person or group is indifferent or has no expertise, their involvement might be very limited. It is important to engage everyone in the conversation. Seek to include every voice, particularly the missing voices of those who are often reluctant to speak out on issues. We've provided several questions to help you assess appropriate levels of involvement in your planning.

Questions to consider

Level of involvement	How to determine?
Involve	Does this person have a stake in the outcome and have some level of expertise?
Don't involve	Is this person indifferent to the outcome and does he/she have no expertise?
Limited involvement	Does the person have concerns about the outcome, but lack expertise, or is he/she indifferent to the outcome?

Adapted From: Hoy and Tarter (2008).

Agreeing on a vision

Every school we've worked with has a vision statement. Even the clearest vision statements need occasional review so that the vision is based on up-to-date information about students and their needs.

For example, one of the frequent updates is to include an unambiguous statement about the commitment to increasing the rigour of your school. A regular review of the vision also allows the school community to recommit to the school's core values and beliefs. Developing a School Vision Statement will guide you as you work with your stakeholders to create a vision statement.

Process for developing a school vision statement

<p>Activity 1: What are the things people are pleased with and frustrated about at this school?</p>	
<p>Activity 2: Invite the group to consider the values that should guide the school. You might ask, 'As we begin planning for our future, what values are most important to you as we create our vision statement?'</p>	
<p>Activity 3: Ask the group to respond to the following: 'Imagine it is the year 2014. We have been able to operationalise our beliefs. What does our school look, sound, and feel like? Describe the vision.'</p>	
<p>Activity 4: In work groups, develop a draft vision statement to be shared with the larger group.</p>	
<p>Activity 5: Share the drafts, ask questions, seek clarification, and seek consensus on a statement. Plan to share it with the larger school community for feedback and comment.</p>	

Source: Williamson and Blackburn (2016).

A second option for developing a vision is through a study group. While the staff in one school were studying their middle grades program, they created a study group that included teachers, administrators, and parents to participate in the process. The group found that through their discussion about vision, they developed greater understanding of the varying points of view and this understanding helped them reach agreement on a shared vision.

Another approach to visioning

Step 1: Discuss current conditions (strengths and opportunities).

Step 2: Use a facilitator to promote participation by everyone in the discussion.

Step 3: Identify focus areas for the vision and provide evidence to support their inclusion.

Step 4: Use technology (perhaps a wiki) to invite every member to suggest a statement of vision and supporting objectives.



The facilitator can review the statements and synthesise the information for the group.

Step 5: Share all proposed statements of vision with every member, asking for feedback and suggestions.

Step 6: Meet and discuss the proposed vision and each proposed objective, agreeing to keep, merge, or discard based on level of support.

Step 7: Agree on vision and supporting objectives.

Determining a decision-making process

The goal of your work with stakeholders is to develop agreement about your vision. Consensus is often the preferred way to make decisions, but consensus can often be fleeting. It doesn't mean that everyone agrees wholeheartedly with the decision, but it does mean that everyone can support the decision. At a minimum, everyone should agree they can live with the decision. Develop a clear process that includes collaborative decision-making.

Sharing information

You'll also want to develop a system for sharing information with your stakeholders. This includes information from you, and from your leadership team. Choose the strategy or strategies that works well with your varying groups.

Ways to communicate

Format for communication	Use for which stakeholder group(s)?
Individual person-to-person communication	
Person-to-small group communication	
Person-to-large group communication	
Written communication via paper or technology (such as email)	
Technology and social media (School website, Twitter, Facebook)	

Step 2: Act to implement the plan

Planning is just the beginning. Implementing and sustaining changes can be even more of a challenge because it is the implementation that forces people to face the reality that things 'may be different'. Implementation often provokes a range of feelings including regret about abandoning familiar practices, exhilaration at the prospect of new ideas, or fear of being overwhelmed by the challenge of doing something new.

As you begin implementation, key strategies include creating a culture of collegiality, executing a clear strategy for collecting, assessing, and using data, identifying ways for teachers to discuss successes and challenges regarding the implementation, having a clear decision-making process, and regularly sharing information in a systematic manner, which we have just addressed.

Culture of collegiality

Building a culture of collegiality is critical to success in school improvement. When teachers are not working together, it will undermine your efforts. Consider where your teachers are on a scale of collegiality, and implement strategies for improving the culture.

Scale of collegiality

Scale	Ideas to consider
Reaching new heights: Teachers and staff consistently support each other, work together to make decisions, are positive about the school, and extend their collaboration to parents and external stakeholders, such as business partners.	Continue to build on success. Provide multiple opportunities for shared decision-making as well as options for teachers to move into leadership roles. Build on positive relationships with parents and external stakeholders.
Making progress: Teachers and staff sometimes support each other, work together to make decisions if led to do so in a structured manner, are generally positive about the school, and sometimes collaborate with parents.	Find your teachers who are more collegial, and move them into leadership roles where they can serve as role models. Provide opportunities for shared decision-making, where you follow a scaffolding model to begin with structure, but then move to less structure. Develop and implement a plan for increased parental involvement, and begin collaboration with external stakeholders, with a school-driven approach.
Working from the base: Teachers and staff usually work in isolation, make decisions individually or follow decisions made by administrators, have mixed attitudes about the school and others in the school, and sometimes share their negative perspective with others.	Provide structured opportunities for teachers to work together to make decisions. Communicate successes that are occurring in your school. Reinforce positive efforts by teachers as they improve. Communicate and work with teachers individually to determine issues and work to improve those that are valid.

Collecting, assessing, and using data

Before you collect data, consider what data you already have, and what types of data you need. You will likely have lots of data readily available to you. Determine the complementary data you need to form a more complete picture of your school's efforts to improve.

There are different types of data, but generally they fall into four categories: demographic data, student achievement and learning data, instructional process data, and attitudinal data.

Types of Data		
Demographic Data: These data describe the students and is most often used to understand the student learning data. It provides insight into equity within your student learning data. Demographic data will reveal ‘who got it’.		
Achievement and Learning Data: This is data that tells us what is going on in a school or district. It tells us what students learned, and what they have achieved. These data help us understand how students are achieving. Student learning data will reveal ‘what students got’.		
Instructional Process Data: This is the data that helps you understand why students achieved at the level that they did. If student achievement in mathematics is low, you might look at the type of mathematics that students do, the time they spend on mathematics, or the alignment of mathematics with state and local standards or benchmarks. School process data will reveal ‘how or why they got it’.		
Attitudinal Data: These data tell you about how people feel about a program, about how they experience your school or district program. Attitudinal or perception data will reveal ‘how they feel or what they believe about it’.		

Source: Williamson and Blackburn (2016). *The Principalship from A to Z* (2nd ed.).

Next, collect additional data you need. Because you can be overwhelmed by all of the data that is available, we’ve found it helpful to use a chart to organise what you have and what you need. As we mentioned earlier, we find it useful to organise data collection around a specific question or issue. The Sample Data Collection chart below focuses on the belief that all students can learn at high levels.

We’ve included samples of data that typically exists in schools, such as specific demographic data, test scores, and grades. In the third column, you will see additional data that can be helpful, but is not as commonly available. Keep in mind these are just examples for your review before you create your own plan.

Sample Data Collection

Question/Issue: Does the instruction at _____ School reflect a belief that all students can learn at high levels?		
Data Type	Available Existing Data	Data to Collect
Demographic Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender • Ethnicity • Attendance • Socio-Economic Status • Retention Rates • Second Language Learners • Students with Special Needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student mobility • Feeder school attended

Student Achievement and Learning Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scores on state achievement tests • Grades • Diagnostic Test Scores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disaggregate based on gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status • Gather test-item analysis data and disaggregate
Instructional Process Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom response opportunities • Walkthrough data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a shadow study of students • Disaggregate student achievement data with teachers’ participation in professional development on new reading program
Attitudinal and Perception Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School climate surveys • Focus group interviews • Teacher surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct parent climate survey

Pattern analysis

Finally, as you begin to use your data, look for patterns across multiple data sources. This will prove helpful when you begin to prioritise action steps in areas that need the most work. You may find that you don’t have enough data to select an area of focus. If so, consider how you might gather additional data. Once you have looked at individual data sources, use the Pattern Analysis to assess patterns.

Pattern Analysis

Data source	Strengths	Areas for growth
Overall areas of focus (based on multiple data sources)		

Lead Article

Discussing successes and challenges

It is important to celebrate positive things happening in your school, especially those that address challenges. One strategy for focusing on teachers' efforts to improve your school.

Name It, Claim It, and Explain It

One way to celebrate your culture is to use 'Name It, Claim It, and Explain It'. As you see an example of exemplary instruction in a classroom, take a digital picture or video of what occurs. Then, begin each of your faculty meetings by projecting the picture or video. Explain to your faculty, 'I saw something great this week. It's up here on the screen. If it belongs to you, stand up and name what you did, claim it as yours, and explain what you were doing'. With this tool, you celebrate something positive related consistently in your meetings.

Note: Be sure to let the teacher know in advance that you are sharing his or her work.

In Step 1, we discussed determining a decision-making process. Step 2 is implementing the plan.

Step 3: Sustain success

Change is more likely to be sustained when your work is guided by a shared vision, and where teachers and other school staff are actively involved in planning, implementing, and monitoring your progress. When change is the result of the personal vision of one or two people, the change is more likely to be abandoned as soon as its advocates leave.

The third part of our planning model focuses on sustaining success. At this stage, you should continue to monitor the implementation and provide continued support for implementation. You should also work to build internal capacity with teacher leaders so that the commitment to increased rigour becomes an integral part of the way your school operates. Although several of the specific steps are similar to those in earlier stages, at this point, it is critical to ensure they are actually occurring, rather than simply being planned.

Step 4: Evaluate and adjust

The final stage of our BASE planning model is to 'evaluate and adjust'. We've come to appreciate that the best schools are those that are comfortable with routine evaluation of their program. They want to know what is going well and they are not afraid of identifying areas for further growth. This routine monitoring and adjusting is what sets them apart from other schools.

The planning process is circular and decisions you make during this step will naturally lead you to continue your planning to become even more rigorous.

Sample Data Collection

Area of implementation	What is working
What is not working	Needed changes

Final thoughts

Principals continue to experience incredible pressure to improve student learning. This leads many schools to bounce from one improvement strategy to another without a clear vision and purpose, and without a clear sense of how they will measure progress and success. Thoughtful planning is critical. It must occur collaboratively and in support of a shared vision. But planning alone is not sufficient. Implementing its process will build for change that is sustainable.

References

- Hoy, WK, & Tarter, CJ 2008, *Administrators solving the problems of practice: Decision-making concepts, cases, and consequences*, 3rd edn, Pearson Education, Boston.
- Williamson, R & Blackburn, B 2018, *Rigor in your school: A toolkit for leaders*, 2nd edn, Routledge, New York.
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