

CONSIDER THESE CRITICAL QUESTIONS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Earlier this spring, I worked with a group of consultants charged with helping school principals lead their staffs in translating new goals and school vision into practice. Most of these schools had spent considerable time developing their goals and visions, and the consultants suspected that most of the principals believed the hardest part of the work was complete. NSDC Executive Director Dennis Sparks has suggested that many schools operate in zones of wishful thinking, believing that embracing new goals and a powerful vision are all they need to produce the desired results. Unfortunately, they fail to understand the depth of work that remains.

On the surface, translating a vision into action seems manageable. We maneuver the process frequently in our daily lives, typically with success. We take meals from vision to reality; we plant seeds and harvest vegetables; we envision a healthier lifestyle and then adopt new exercise and eating routines. Each of these daily tasks comes to fruition because we have a vision and learn the steps necessary to make it a reality.

Some visions require the understanding and commitment of larger numbers of people. While the process may require more steps, the results are similar. Someone creates a new building, and a blueprint guides everyone through to its completion. Someone conceives of a wonderful story, and a screenwriter initiates the process needed to bring it to movie theaters. Daily, many people combine their talents and efforts to produce newspapers for readers across this country.

In the end, a builder has an architectural plan, a cook has a recipe, a conductor has a score. What do school leadership teams have? They have a school improvement plan. And while most educators understand that the plan must identify roles for key players, actions to take, and deadlines for action, few can distinguish between powerful and mediocre plans.

NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, when used as school leadership teams develop a school improvement plan, can produce the depth of change required to make schools' goals and visions a reality.

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Teams that use NSDC's standards to develop such plans can produce powerful outcomes. When planners use the standards as guides, they pay attention to context, process, and content, all critical components of the planning process.

As they identify and consider the critical questions and ideas embedded in each standard, school leadership teams will address the key factors that produce richly detailed and powerful plans. Such examination can contribute to what some feel is a messy part of the change process — collecting and analyzing data, and determining what to include or exclude in the school improvement plan. Leadership teams can develop and implement action plans based on their most important findings, moving a school closer to its desired goals and vision. This process can help a school planning team clarify its theory of action.

Schools can test the quality of their plans by examining the assumptions underlying each action they intend to include. By considering actions and discussing assumptions, teams can produce an even more effective plan.

To begin the planning process, consider some critical questions. Use these questions with your current district or school vision and goals to see whether you need additional information to strengthen a plan or to assist you in developing your plans for next year. School leadership teams also can study NSDC's standards to identify additional questions and issues.

CONTEXT

Learning communities

- What role must schoolwide and team learning play in the school achieving its goals and vision?
- How will this learning be implemented in the way that will produce the most impact?

Leadership

- What specific knowledge and skills must the principal and teacher leaders develop to help them achieve the goals and vision?
- How will support for principal and teacher leadership learning be structured?

Resources

- How should time and money be allocated to enable the school to achieve the vision and goals?
- How will this be accomplished?



In each issue of *JSD*, Stephanie Hirsh writes about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development. Columns about the standards can be found at www.nsd.org.

PROCESS

Data-driven

- What data are available to help determine the staff's most significant learning needs related to the goals and vision?
- What implications for planning does an analysis of the data produce?

Evaluation

- What kinds of data will be collected to monitor the school's progress toward achieving the goals and vision?
- What are the critical benchmarks for assessing progress?

Research-based

- What research will be consulted as the team selects strategies and programs for improvement?

Design

- What new knowledge and skills will adults need to realize the goals and vision?
- What learning choices will adults have so they are able to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve the goals and vision?

Learning

- What additional support will be offered to staff members who may have particular challenges associated with their career stages or personal factors?
- How will this assessment be made?

Collaboration

- To what degree is staff collaboration required to achieve the goals and vision?
- What knowledge and skills will staff members need to produce the desired outcome?

CONTENT

Equity

- Do the school's vision and goals address culturally responsive teaching, safe and orderly classrooms, and high expectations for all students?
- To what degree does the data indicate staff needs with regard to these issues?
- How will they be addressed?

Teaching quality

- Do the vision and goals address teachers' content knowledge, research-based instruction, and assessment literacy? To what degree do the data indicate staff needs with regard to these issues?
- How will these needs be addressed?

Family involvement

- What role will families play in achieving the vision and goals?
- What actions will the school take to support families with their responsibilities?

Combined ignorance does not create powerful plans. All educators can write school improvement plans. They can choose tasks, assign responsibilities, and document progress. But unless teams choose meaningful strategies and monitor their progress for significant outcomes, they will produce no better results than they did with last year's plan, and the school will not progress toward its goals and vision. Progress is not just about taking action, but about taking the right actions. NSDC's Standards for Staff Development can guide a school through the process of selecting actions that will lead to the most significant results. ■