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Leadership through Collaborative Strategic Planning: One School's Journey

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

Educational administrators, school board members, and policy makers have been mandated to account for the learning and performance of the highly diverse students that comprise today's classrooms. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004) have presented a set of challenges for educating all children using data-driven decisions in a standards-based curriculum with culturally responsive practices. These mandates from federal and state legislation demand a change in administrative culture. These challenges require school personnel to develop plans to adjust their practices to meet the academic and behavioral needs of all students. Additionally, federal and state laws require local educational agencies (LEAs) to meet rigorous standards and provide evidence of progress through academic yearly progress (AYP) reports.

The need for effective strategic planning has also intensified because of the constraints in resources and increased expectations for accountability from external agencies such as state governments (Welsh 2005). In order to effectively meet these challenges school districts must interpret these regulations and policies and then develop system-wide action plans to effectively put them into practice. Solutions now require detailed blueprints for systemic change that identify strategic performance indicators and benchmarks. These plans require that administrators, teachers, counselors and other related professionals work collaboratively to identify and improve positive academic and behavioral supports across the curriculum with simplicity and commitment (Quinn 2000). Therefore, professional collaboration is critical.

School district personnel need to adopt models that ensure academic success for all children, provide fiscally sound management, and demonstrate effective educational leadership in the 21st century. These models need to be developed using collaborative strategic planning processes that reach beyond traditional models of planning for school change. The Ohio Integrated Systems Model (OISM) will be presented with a focus on the process of collaborative strategic planning. The key features of OISM will be developed and embedded in a description of one rural school's journey to raise achievement levels. Each element will illustrate how the collaborative strategic planning process can address the needs of individual students and schools.

One State's Response: The Ohio Integrated Systems Model (OISM)

These academic and behavioral challenges became the primary catalyst for the development of the Ohio Integrated Systems Model (OISM) (See Figure 1).OISM is a comprehensive prevention and intervention model that is designed to systematically assess and address the academic and behavioral needs of all students. The model provides both academic and behavioral supports across three tiers that are: 1) school-wide (80-90% of students); 2) targeted (5-10% of students); and 3) intensive (1-5%). OISM requires the use of collaborative strategic planning (CSP) and collaborative problem-solving processes to ensure that all students are assessed and assisted with academic and behavioral

supports. Under the primary leadership of the principal, the building leadership team (BLT) includes parents and representatives from administration, general education, special education, and related services. CSP requires team members to define and analyze problems, set appropriate goals, develop and implement a data-based action plan, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

Collaborative Strategic Planning v. Traditional Planning

School personnel have long faced pressures to undergo systemic organizational changes. These changes are driven by mandates of accountability, decreased budgets, advances in technology, and questions from parents and taxpayers of district programs, policies and procedures. Traditional planning strategies that were developed to answer these demands for change often began as “top down” or central office initiatives resulting in processes that would produce a “new vision” using long-term planning. Cooper (1985) provided the following definition of traditional strategic planning:

…typical planning [that] is generated by internal organizational goals and priorities. The typical plan charts a course of action to achieve these goals, accounting for external forces primarily as obstacles or incentives to their achievement. The process is often formal and the product is schematic, documenting and projecting current activity in relation to stated objectives of the organization (1).

Many school districts have implemented some form of long-range planning to achieve their goals. However, an evaluation of these traditional planning processes suggest that after the plan was developed it was either not followed as written or implemented at all.

Often stakeholders lacked the necessary resources and commitment to implement and evaluate plans and/or assumed a closed system using timelines with fixed years of planning (Hambright and Diamontes 2004).

One of the key components of OISM is Collaborative Strategic Planning (CSP) which is defined as a collaborative and data-driven process (OISM Coaches Manual 2005). Leadership teams are formed at the:

o district level to develop a strategic plan to guide school improvement;

o building level to develop a leadership plan; and at the

o intervention level to develop individual student plans.

These multi-tiered teams represent all stakeholders to include the superintendent,

building principals, general and special education teachers, curriculum specialists and parent groups. These teams use a collaborative problem-solving process to develop data-based action plans to meet both academic and behavioral needs of all students. At the building level principal-led teams are formed to implement specific action plans for school–wide academic and behavior supports. Additionally, these plans need to include effective assessment for monitoring student progress. Collaboration teams also extend beyond district personnel to include school psychologists and other curriculum-related specialists from regional educational resource centers, (now entitled State Support Teams (SST)).The advantages of CSP include multiple teams to develop the plan, to collect data and share in the decision making. A school-wide CSP provides the opportunity to assess traditional

curricular and instructional practices that may be ineffective and replace them with practices that are more culturally responsive and that will impact a wider range of students.

Collaborative Strategic Planning: One School's Journey

In a small rural elementary school a principal and teachers were receiving preliminary data from curriculum and assessment mapping that indicated their students' reading skills were below grade level. Behaviorally, they had been dealing with increased problems of poor motivation, aggressive behavior, and restlessness. This principal-led team collaborated with OISM coaches from their regional education service center (ESC) using their student data to develop an action plan to address these reading and behavior needs.

The Implementation of OISM

Year 1: Reading and Behavior

The principal and teachers developed a three-year strategic plan to study early literacy initiatives and measure behavior with the goal to reduce the number of students who needed targeted (Level Two) or intensive (Level Three) academic and/or behavior intervention (See Figure 1). This team focused on school-wide reading for students in grades kindergarten through second grade and behavior for K-fourth graders. To get started, the principal gathered approximately 14 of her faculty members at a retreat where they collaboratively developed an action plan. Behaviorally, this group of educators developed three rules that would be taught to all students, enforced by all teachers and displayed prominently on appropriate walls throughout the entire school. The three rules that were agreed upon and supported by all attendees were:

1. Be Kind

2. Be Safe

3. Be Respectful

Early literacy initiatives play a prominent role in the OISM principles. Therefore, school-wide testing was initiated in reading. A school psychologist, also an OISM coach, assisted the team in the collection of data for reading and behavior. Approximately 200 students were tested three times throughout the school year using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS).

Year II: Refining the Plan

During the second year, the OISM team attended a series of professional development training with an area State Support Team (SST). They learned the specific key elements of OISM. The faculty focused on positive behavior supports (PBS) and adopted a token economy system that reinforced the importance of learning by using school supplies as rewards. As each team member began to implement the action plan, the principal began recording the data relative to behavior with the use of the School-Wide Information System (SWIS). The guidance counselor introduced a bully prevention program and the school psychologist continued to enter second-year data using DIBELS.

As part of the collaborative strategic plan, the faculty received professional development in functional

behavior assessment. They were asked, " What is the purpose of the child's behavior?" which was part of their school-developed referral process and congruent with SWIS. Using data-based decision making, the OISM coach introduced the team to the reading program, Success for All (SFA). Since SFA was research-based and developed by educators, the school adopted the program based upon the recommendation of the team. Thus, SFA became the 90-minute daily prescriptive core reading program. The teachers also learned the science behind grouping that blending the genders into groups versus the traditional method of isolating the genders was more effective.

Year III: Professional Development

During the third year, the faculty had completed approximately 220 hours of professional development at the school site. The big question remained, "How do teachers analyze classroom data and improve instruction based on that data?" This was proven to be the most difficult task. Thus, they investigated systems to monitor student progress. The team assessed data from DIBELS and SFA. They investigated AIMSweb®, 'a scientifically based, formative assessment system that 'informs' the teaching and learning process by providing continuous student performance' in math and spelling. The team discovered that AIMSweb would automatically make graphs to assist the teachers in monitoring progress.

Previously, the faculty had engaged in curriculum mapping, but during their second year of OISM, the second grade teachers began to use assessment mapping for mathematics for their students. The teachers found that pacing was critical, thus a 'pacing calendar' was developed to map out the daily delivery of the mathematics content. During an OISM meeting, a team member commented that what she had noted to be important was the sequence of curriculum mapping, then assessment mapping, then a pacing calendar. Also interfaced with this task is the skill to engage in curriculum-based assessment (CBA). Through collaborative strategic planning, it became clear that all lesson and unit plans written must be measurable. This rural school then focused on writing more effective standards–based units and learning activities that were organized around grade-level indicators and were also culturally responsive.

Year IV: Expanding the Plan

Each year this OISM team strategically collaborated to identify and analyze problems in student learning, set data-driven goals, develop an action plan of scientifically-based strategies, and monitor student progress to evaluate the plan. The strategic collaboration with OISM coaches from the regional education service center helped this team remain consistent and focused with clear interpretations of the data to inform decision-making. Where there were areas of weakness, as a team, these educators established new goals to improve performance. The team's goals for year 4 included:

· engaging students as active participants in the operations of their classrooms such as classroom discipline plans and units of study;

· sharing results with other district buildings to build district-level teams and

· building partnerships with additional local and state professional associations for professional development.

Summary

The mandates of NCLB and IDEIA have definitely presented some challenges for educators in meeting the needs of all children. These changes in legislation have impacted the culture of our schools nationwide and have required educators to assess what and how they are teaching children. Thus, professional practices must be adjusted to meet student needs through effective collaborative strategic planning. Collaboration among school personnel is essential to bring about change to ensure success for all students. The authors ask their readers to consider the Ohio Integrated Systems Model (OISM). Currently, approximately 226 Ohio schools have received an OISM grant and/or have adopted OISM as a model for school change (Bell, Falor and Ward 2007).

The Ohio Department of Education, the Office of Exceptional Children, State Support Team (SST), the Ohio Association of Elementary Schools Administrators (OAESA) and the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA) can provide direction and assistance. Educators who would like to obtain additional information about OISM should visit the Ohio Department of Education website at http://www.ode.state.oh.us/.

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