

Leadership Themes from Schools Engaging in Accelerated Improvement

Leadership Themes – Schools are characterized by:

1. Leaders and leadership teams who exhibit a sense of urgency, expertise, and relational leadership skills.
2. An improvement mind-set that permeates all school behaviors, decisions, discourse, and actions.
3. Highly consistent, aligned, and rigorous instructional practices.

An analysis of how schools engage in successful and sustainable accelerated improvement highlighted three themes that cut across the four practices. These themes tend to characterize effective schools and school leadership.

The cross-practices leadership themes exemplify the overarching culture of successful schools and may provide another useful lens for thinking about what accelerated improvement requires, beyond implementing discrete structures, policies, and practices.

Theme 1: Leaders and leadership teams who have a sense of urgency, expertise, and relational leadership skills

Leadership in schools engaging in accelerated improvement is characterized by certain attributes, features, and actions that, according to the research on leadership and school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), appear to be particularly important in schools working to dramatically improve student achievement. What is equally important for those engaged in school improvement is to consider these attributes as crucial ingredients for a successful effort, and to ensure that such leadership attributes are in place and are actively supported by district and state policies.

Core Leadership Attributes

- ✓ **Sense of urgency:** The principal (and, sometimes, a new leadership team) are willing and eager to take on the challenge of improving core instruction and engaging in the effort needed to do so. The principal and leadership team have a strong sense of urgency to change the lives of students in the school and are willing to “do whatever it takes” to improve. The principal has a mantra of high expectations and no excuses and communicates this clearly and consistently to staff, ensuring that all teachers believe that they can directly impact their students’ achievement regardless of the students’ circumstances.
- ✓ **Expertise:** The principal and leadership team come to the school with a strong understanding and knowledge of what an effective school looks and feels like, organizationally and instructionally, and a proven track record of success in similar situations. They have expertise in educational best practice, especially regarding what rigorous instruction looks like and requires, and they know that a major part of the work involves infusing this knowledge among and across the entire school community. Building off their understanding of educational best practices, the principal and leadership set a few key non-negotiables and expectations for instructional practices and student behavior. The principal and administration are in classrooms daily, providing feedback to teachers in terms of non-negotiable instructional expectations. Giving and receiving feedback is valued by all instructional staff and part of what it means to be a professional.
- ✓ **Relational:** The principal has a deep understanding of leadership as relational and involving the building of trusting and collegial relationships across the school community. The principal understands that a key piece of the work is to build an organization in which leaders and teachers “like to work together,” where there is shared ownership of students, and where teachers are empowered to learn from one another as colleagues. This is accomplished by providing teachers with the skill, time, and trust to bring their own issues, or problems of practice, to the surface and work through these issues collectively.

Adapted from 2016 Massachusetts Turnaround Practices Field Guide: Lane, B., Unger, C., & Stein, L. (2016). *2016 Massachusetts Turnaround Practices Field Guide: A Research-Based Guide Designed to Support District and School Leaders Engaged in School Turnaround Efforts*. Prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Theme 2: Improvement mind-set that permeates all behaviors, decisions, discourse, and actions

Schools engaging in accelerated improvement are characterized by an *improvement mind-set*. This is a schoolwide culture in which leaders and teachers work closely with one another to actively identify and address specific problems of practice. (Different schools use different terminology, e.g., learning mindset, and may define the broad concept slightly differently.) Leaders in these schools infuse this mind-set into the core functions of teaching, such as developing and modifying lesson plans, providing rigorous core and tiered instruction, and using data to provide students with targeted interventions. When schools identify and then address a problem of practice, it is imperative that they have and maintain an *improvement mind-set*, so that teachers work collectively to improve their individual and joint efforts to improve instruction and practice. This way, they learn from each other through the process, rather than trying to improve in isolation from one another, with classroom doors closed.

Approaching problems of practice with an *improvement mind-set* happens when leaders and teachers identify key issues or challenges that are influencing their ability to improve student learning (e.g., schedules and staffing challenges, students having trouble with open-response questions, academic vocabulary, or evidence-based argumentation, and lack of instructional alignment) and then work collectively (in grade-level teams, in vertical teams, or across the entire school community) to solve this problem. Some school leaders use an *adaptive leadership model*, which the original theorists define as a “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz, 2009, p. 14).

Cultivating and then using an *improvement mind-set* is not, however, something that happens overnight or that can be left to chance. Cultivating this way of working and engaging with others requires a leader with specific leadership attributes, such as expertise, relational trust, and a sense of urgency, as well as a commitment to setting high expectations for teachers. Leadership is intentional in creating the conditions in which teachers are willing and eager to work together to solve a common problem, acknowledges that they may not individually have the answers to every challenge, while collectively taking ownership for the success of *all* students. It is also important that school leaders develop multiple teaming structures—a matrix of grade-level teams, vertical teams, and student support teams—and support teachers in using these structures effectively. Developing a system of high-functioning teaming structures and communication channels often accelerates (a) problem diagnosis; (b) the development, implementation, and testing of new practices; and (c) the sharing and spread of practices that work.

There's too much for one person to do, there's too much for two people to do. We had to go at it from a team approach from the very beginning. The way I understand the adaptive model is that, presenting issues come in, you vet out and decide what's the most important thing that is pressing upon the success of the organization. Then you, as a team, come up with solutions and ideas to try to resolve those issues, and you try it out. If it works and it's a positive contribution to the outcomes and the goals, then you institutionalize the effort across the school or across different grades.

Union Hill Principal

I think there's a tremendous learner mind-set here, particularly embodied by the team leaders, the team facilitators. Folks are really okay admitting, “We don't know this,” or identifying weak spots in their practice, and digging into how to fix it...or not fix it... I think that everyone seated around this table has ownership over the process in a way that's really exemplary.

Burke High School Principal

Theme 3. Highly consistent, aligned, and rigorous instructional practices

Schools engaging in accelerated improvement have developed tightly aligned and consistent curricula, expectations, instructional strategies, and assessment tools. What is potentially new about this theme is the extent of the alignment and consistency and the ways in which teachers (often with the support of administrative leaders) are working together to develop vertically and horizontally aligned instruction and instructional strategies, which have clear implications for schools engaged in accelerated improvement and turnaround.

What do consistency and alignment mean in practice? Although the degree of consistency varies from one school to the next, schools that have made significant gains in student learning are places in which teachers in each grade level have developed common units and lesson plans and are teaching the same lesson to their students within the same week, if not the same day. Within each lesson, teachers have developed and are using similar prompts, note-taking techniques, and common strategies to support students in accessing the content of the lesson. Across grades, teachers have analyzed the standards and not only know precisely what students need to know and be able to do from one grade level to the next, but also intentionally use standards-aligned key words, phrases, and essential questions, taught and reinforced in earlier grades, to support students. Each lesson, within and across grades, is similarly structured (e.g., entry work, activators, exit tickets), and behavioral expectations are the same, across the entire school. High-quality instruction, aligned to the state standards, is by definition consistent and aligned across content and grade levels. Students then know exactly what to expect in each class and can employ the same tools to access information. Consistency in instructional strategies, language, and general classroom management removes barriers to learning for students identified for Special Education, English language learners (ELLs) and high-need students who may struggle with academic language.

To an outside observer, the work in such schools may appear highly routinized and prescriptive. However, teachers collectively have a great deal of autonomy, and the work is often perceived as more “owned” and more valuing of teacher expertise, because teachers have developed common lessons, routines, and instructional strategies collaboratively rather than individually. Often, grade-level, team-developed strategies are rolled up to the school after testing, reflection, and evidence of impact. Tight alignment and consistency of instructional practices reduce instructional variability across the school, making it easier to develop, implement, and test new instructional strategies, and to then scale up effective strategies across the entire school. These schools are effective learning organizations with the infrastructure and know-how to quickly and effectively implement proven instructional and organizational improvements.