



## *A Center Policy Report*

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### **Executive Summary**

#### *Systemic Change for School Improvement:*

#### **Designing, Implementing, and Sustaining Prototypes and Going to Scale**

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*Systemic Change for School Improvement:*  
Designing, Implementing, and Sustaining Prototypes and Going to Scale

**B**ased on analyses of school improvement planning guides, we previously highlighted the lack of emphasis on fundamental transformations in schools to (a) enable all school staff to address barriers to learning in a comprehensive manner and (b) facilitate teacher ability to engage and re-engage students in classroom learning. Further analyses of such planning guides indicate that they also tend not to address how desired improvements will be accomplished. That is, we find little evidence of sophisticated strategic planning for how schools and districts intend to get from here to there with fidelity and in ways that sustain improvements and scale-up over time.

Moreover, a survey of the relevant literature suggests that the nation's research agenda does not include major initiatives to delineate and test models for widespread replication of education reforms. Little attention has been paid to the complexities of large scale diffusion. Leadership training for education policy makers and administrators has given short shrift to the topic of scale-up processes and problems. And, in our work, we find that most personnel who are expected to act as change agents in districts and schools have relatively little specific training in facilitating major systemic changes.

**The Need**

Major school improvements require substantive systemic change. And, if the intent is to leave no child behind, implementation of fundamental and essential improvements has to be replicated in all schools. However, effective change on a large scale cannot even be approximated as long as policy makers, education leaders, and researchers continue to treat systemic change as an after thought.

To encourage a greater policy discussion of the complexities of implementing major school improvements on a large scale, this report (a) discusses the need to expand school improvement planning to address *how* schools and districts will accomplish necessary systemic changes, (b) outlines some basic considerations related to systemic change, and (c) proposes a set of policy actions.

School improvement obviously needs to begin with a clear framework and map for what changes are to be made. It should be equally obvious that there must be a clear framework and map for how to get from here to there, especially when the improvements require significant systemic change. And, in both cases, there is a need for a strong science-base, leadership, and adequate resources for capacity building.

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## Linking Logic Models for School Improvement

A basic framework is presented to highlight how major elements involved in designing school improvements are logically connected to considerations about systemic change. That is, the same elements can be used to frame key intervention concerns related to school improvement and systemic change, and each is intimately linked to the other. The elements are conceived as encompassing

- the vision, aims, and underlying rationale for what follows
- the resources needed to do the work
- the general functions, major tasks, activities, and phases that must be pursued
- the infrastructure and strategies needed to carry out the functions, tasks, and activities
- the positive and negative results that emerge.

Strategic planning for school improvement should account for each of these elements, first with respect to a school's prototype for ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in school and then with respect to how the school will accomplish essential changes. At the district level, the need is for a strategic plan that clarifies how the district will facilitate replication and scale-up of prototype practices. The report briefly explores each element as it relates to systemic change.

## Policy Recommendations

Given that systemic change is of central importance in efforts to improve schools and schooling, we suggest policy decision makers must recognize and support a growing research and training agenda to advance understanding and capability for designing, implementing, and sustaining prototypes and taking them to scale.

**Research** – Currently, the nation's research agenda does not include major initiatives to delineate and test models for widespread replication of education reforms. Relatedly, too little attention has been paid to the complexities of implementation and large scale diffusion of empirically supported practices. (Indeed, the emphasis has been mainly on studying diffusion of such practices in terms of the problem of replication with fidelity, rather than viewing it as a particular instance of effecting systemic change.) Thus:

*Recommendation #1:* Elevate the priority status of federal research related to understanding systemic change concerns involved in school improvement. The emphasis should be on building conceptual models and developing and evaluating specific interventions for dealing with the processes and problems associated with introducing, sustaining, and scaling-up (diffusing) new initiatives and reforms.

While it is increasingly common for agencies to include an emphasis on the importance of sustainability of innovations when issuing "Requests for Application" (RFAs), it is unclear how seriously the matter is taken in preparing proposals and in decisions about which are funded. Thus:

*Recommendation #2:* RFAs for developing and evaluating school interventions should not only focus on the proposed prototype, but should require a strategic plan that details how the work will be sustained beyond the period of funding and how and to what degree it will be replicated.

**Pre- and In-Service Training** – Both the available literature and our work in the field make it evident that leadership training for education policy makers and administrators has given short shrift to systemic change processes and problems. Thus, it is not surprising to find that most school improvement planning guides do not include a focus on how the improvements will be accomplished, and personnel who are expected to act as change agents in districts and schools have relatively little specific training in facilitating major systemic changes. Thus:

*Recommendation #3:* Policy makers should ensure that school improvement planning guides are expanded to include a section on how the improvements will be accomplished.

*Recommendation #4:* A portion of funds currently allocated for school improvement should be redeployed to underwrite the costs of developing staff for systemic change, especially training for change leadership and change agent staff.

*Recommendation #5:* School accountability and certification reviews should be expanded to prominently include concerns related to leadership and staff development for implementing and evaluating the systemic changes needed to accomplish planned school improvements.

**Operational Supports and Evaluation Safeguards** – Finally, reforms and major school improvements obviously require ensuring that those who operate essential mechanisms not only have adequate training, but also have essential resources and support, initially and over time. Moreover, there must be appropriate incentives and safeguards for individuals as they become enmeshed in the complexities of systemic change. These are matters that require the following school board and administrative actions.

*Recommendation # 6:* Allocations for every major initiative for school improvement should include a separate, albeit temporary, budget to underwrite the costs of effective systemic change and should reflect a commitment to sustainability.

*Recommendation # 7:* Special personnel evaluation and accountability procedures should be formulated for use during periods of major systemic change to make allowances for dips in performance as schools cope with the extra-ordinarily complex problems that inevitably arise in pursuing comprehensive school improvements.

Those who set out to improve schools and schooling across a district are confronted with two enormous tasks. The first is to develop prototypes; the second involves large-scale replication. One without the other is insufficient. Yet considerably more attention is paid to developing and validating prototypes than to delineating and testing systemic change processes required for sustainability, replication, and scale-up. Clearly, it is time to correct this deficiency.