

The Working Systemically Approach

Levels, Components, and Competencies

The Working Systemically approach is a multidimensional process for school improvement that focuses on key *components* of the system that need to be considered in supporting student achievement. It also identifies a core set of *competencies* that leaders in the system need to develop as they address the components. In order to ensure that the improvement is sustained over time, the approach targets multiple *levels* of the system. The goal of the Working

Figure 1 Working Systemically Dimensions



Systemically approach is to address the components and competencies at all levels, thereby resulting in systemwide improvement to increase student achievement (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008). These three dimensions (see Figure 1) must be considered in order to effect deep and lasting improvement.

LEVELS OF THE SYSTEM

A systems approach involves all levels of the educational enterprise (i.e., national, state, intermediate agencies, district, school, and classroom). These levels designate “the who” of the system. Improvement efforts designed to increase student achievement must be coordinated at each of these levels because each level plays a critical role in supporting and sustaining student achievement. When these levels are coordinated and working toward the same goal, they can provide a strong network of support for increased student outcomes. The six levels of the system that are integrated throughout the Working Systemically approach are described as follows:

National Level

The national level is where policy is established for federal education funding, along with guidelines for how those funds are distributed and monitored. In recent years, the national level is where dramatic steps have been taken to establish common core state standards to ensure that students across the nation are college and career ready at the end of high school. The national level also oversees large-scale data collection across the states and provides resources for dissemination of research. This level serves to focus national attention on key educational issues and ensures equal access to education.

State Level

States enact statewide educational policy; allocate funds; and prescribe mandates, guidelines, incentives, and sanctions designed to support and ensure student achievement. Some states also identify their own standards that define what students are supposed to know and be able to do at designated grade levels, as well as oversee assessments of student achievement and statewide accountability systems. Technical assistance for schools in need of improvement is also often provided through statewide efforts.

Intermediate Agency Level

Intermediate agencies (e.g., education service centers, universities) are authorized to implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or education commissioner and to assist districts and schools in operating more efficiently and effectively. Core services provided by this level of the system include training to improve instruction and program implementation, as well as special assistance to low-performing schools. Intermediate agencies also assist districts in complying with state laws and rules and with state or federal special education requirements. This level of the system provides training and assistance to

teachers, administrators, members of district boards of education, and members of site-based decision-making committees.

District Level

Local policies are a vital part of improving student achievement. In addition to developing those policies, districts determine how policy is implemented and how personnel and other resources are allocated. In recent years, districts have become increasingly accountable for the learning outcomes of students in the schools within the districts. Boards of education, administrators, and district leadership teams are called upon to establish local educational priorities and help maintain the focus on improving student learning. In addition, districts create curricula aligned to common core or state standards that guide instruction and assessment at the school level.

School Level

The school level has long been the focal point for most accountability systems aimed at improving student achievement. This is the level where teachers and administrators collaborate to develop structures and processes to support teaching and learning. A primary responsibility at this level is ensuring alignment of instruction and assessment to the district curriculum. The culture established at the school level determines the extent to which structures, processes, and relationships support student and teacher growth.

Classroom Level

It is at this level where teachers create the conditions in which students can acquire the knowledge and skills prescribed by standards and curriculum documents. It is here that teachers implement instructional strategies and where students and teachers interact directly with the content. Relationships established at this level are extremely critical to the overall culture of the school and can enhance or diminish the context in which students learn.

COMPONENTS OF THE SYSTEM

The components of the Working Systemically approach represent “the what” of the system. Eight components represent the aspects of the education system on which schools, districts, and state departments of education typically focus their work. Processes that support each of the components need to be planned and coordinated with the common intention of meeting or exceeding student achievement goals.

Standards

Standards define and describe what students are expected to know and be able to do in broad terms at specific intervals of their educational experience. The present effort to establish common core state standards highlights the importance

of rigorous expectations for students across the nation. Because states are increasingly aligning their assessments to these standards, an excellent starting point for beginning the improvement work is ensuring that district and school staff fully understand what students must know and be able to do to meet each standard.

Curriculum

Curriculum defines more precise district expectations of what students should know and be able to do. Ideally, the curriculum also provides a scope and sequence for learning, as well as appropriate instructional strategies and resources. A high-quality curriculum is aligned to common core or state standards and provides a road map to ensure coherence across subject areas and grade levels, making it easier for schools and teachers to organize and deliver instruction.

Instruction

Instruction is the “how” of teaching and includes the strategies used to deliver the district’s curriculum. Effective teachers select evidence-based instructional strategies and ensure that their instruction addresses the needs and interests of individual students. They continually analyze the impact of their instruction on student achievement by examining student work, and they collaborate regularly to enhance their individual and collective capacity to help students achieve expected learning outcomes.

Assessment

Assessment consists of formal and informal procedures that provide teachers, schools, districts, and states a means for measuring student progress toward meeting state standards and goals set by the district and school. A viable assessment system uses multiple sources of data that measure student progress on an ongoing basis. Assessment data can also provide information about the effectiveness of specific improvement initiatives, as well as instructional strategies and resources designed to improve student performance.

Resources

Resources include financial and other assets available to a system that provide qualified and effective staff, instructional material and equipment, and facilities that support learning. Resources also include the time available for instruction, professional collaboration, and staff learning. In effective systems, decisions about resource allocation are aligned to priority district and school goals and support ongoing improvement efforts.

Professional Staff

Professional staff takes into consideration the recruitment and retention of high-quality personnel across the system. Decisions about the selection, development, and assignment of staff should reflect the needs, focus areas, and

priorities of the system. As a primary resource at all levels of the system, the staff's knowledge, skill, and commitment will largely determine the successful outcome of any educational improvement initiative.

Policy and Governance

Policy and governance describe the rules and procedures—conceived at the national, state, and local levels—that are to be followed and how decisions are made to implement those rules and procedures. While policy focuses primarily on written rules and procedures, governance refers to the actions that leaders take to implement the policies and procedures. In some cases, governance is carried out by a group of individuals—the school board, for example. More frequently, it is carried out by formal and informal leaders who have responsibility for implementing policies and moving their district and schools to higher levels of performance.

Family and Community

Family and community involvement is an essential component in the educational system and can significantly contribute to the improvement work at the district, school, and classroom levels. Systems that actively seek strong family and community partnerships examine structural and psychological barriers that inhibit healthy relationships and seek multiple ways to connect to external entities to develop and reach shared goals. Positive connections among teachers, parents, schools, and the community can help identify and utilize the many available resources that schools can draw upon to support student learning.

COMPETENCIES FOR WORKING SYSTEMICALLY

School improvement approaches commonly focus on one or more of the components of the system described previously. However, without development of special competencies to work on these components, sustainable systemic improvement is not likely to occur. The Working Systemically approach focuses on building these competencies across all levels of the local system as the improvement work is conducted. Maintaining a focus on these competencies is an extremely critical aspect of building system capacity to sustain improvement over time.

Creating Coherence

Creating coherence involves taking separate parts of the system and integrating them to achieve desired outcomes (Corallo & McDonald, 2002; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). Low-performing districts and schools typically respond to state and federal mandates and accountability systems in a piecemeal fashion. When a new need emerges, a new “fix” (often a new program) is found. This approach creates a fragmented system with little or no coherence among the “fixes.”

With many different disconnected and incoherent reform efforts going on at once, district and school staff may work hard but become discouraged when they do not achieve desired results. Additionally, teachers and administrators often lack clarity about what the standards require students to know and be able to do. In such cases, teachers draw almost exclusively from their textbooks and personal preferences for what should be taught and assessed. Teachers are sometimes unaware of research-based instructional strategies that actively engage students in learning. Administrators may have limited knowledge of what they should be looking for in classroom visits, how professional development should be designed, and where they should allocate their limited resources.

The Working Systemically approach promotes a shared understanding of the extent to which curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned to standards within the local system. It involves district and school leaders actively supporting a coordinated effort and avoiding competing priorities. Through both actions and words, effective leaders continually reinforce the premise that developing successful students who can meet challenging standards is the system's top priority. Engaging stakeholders at the classroom, school, and district levels in collaborative and purposeful work to improve teaching and learning is essential for creating a coherent instructional focus.

The following questions should guide the work to build this competency in regard to alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to standards—a critical aspect of a coherent system:

- Does the system have a curriculum that is aligned to state standards?
- Does the system ensure that the selection of programs and use of resources are aligned to the curriculum and student needs?
- Does the system have a curriculum scope and sequence that identifies what students should know and be able to do at each grade level?
- Does the system communicate a clear expectation that teachers use a curriculum aligned to state standards to guide their instruction?
- Does the system ensure that content expertise is available and utilized appropriately so that research-based strategies are used in the classroom?

Collecting, Interpreting, and Using Data

Collecting, interpreting, and using data is essential to making sound decisions about improving schools and districts. Identifying trends and patterns in data from multiple sources helps leaders discover underlying factors contributing to core issues and problems that need to be addressed. A deeper understanding of the nature and underlying causes of student achievement challenges in the system enables leaders to make decisions that will lead to long-term solutions.

Many districts and schools typically examine data only in the form of student test results, without exploring underlying causes of low student achievement.

As a result, they often act on hunches or beliefs that may or may not accurately represent what actually exists. This competency entails collecting data from multiple sources, arranging the data in formats that help individuals interpret them and draw conclusions, and using information from the data to take appropriate action (Bernhardt, 2004).

The Working Systemically approach calls for building the capacity of the district and school staff to collect, interpret, and use data effectively. Trends and patterns in student learning data become apparent in longitudinal arrays of data. The achievement levels of various demographic groups of students within the school and district are disaggregated to identify where strengths and weaknesses exist. Perceptual data, collected through surveys and interviews with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders, are studied to uncover underlying attitudes and beliefs that influence action. School process data are used to determine, for example, how well district and school teams are functioning and whether professional development is affecting attitudes, beliefs, and actions. This information is crucial to effective improvement planning.

The following questions should guide the work to build this competency:

- Does the system have a process and resources for collecting and disaggregating student learning data and organizing them in understandable and useful formats?
- Does the system use multiple types of data (student achievement, demographic, perceptual, and school process) to gain a better understanding of problems and to formulate plans?
- Does the system have processes for turning data into actions that provide timely interventions for students who are not mastering the standards?

Ensuring Continuous Professional Learning

Systems that ensure continuous professional learning provide ongoing job-embedded opportunities for all staff to develop their knowledge and skills. Key elements of effective professional learning critical for sustaining improvement include

- relevance to district and school goals, needs, skill levels, and learning preferences of participants;
- a process that is long term and integrated into daily practice; and
- feedback to teachers about their progress in using the knowledge and skills learned (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2003).

Successful educational systems use multiple forms of data to identify needs of the staff for training and development. In these systems, principals participate actively in opportunities for learning and take part in planning, conducting, implementing, and evaluating professional development. Schools that

understand the importance of professional learning provide adequate time for staff development and follow-up. In these schools, teachers are provided multiple opportunities for networking and receive the ongoing support and materials they need as they implement new instructional strategies.

The Working Systemically approach emphasizes professional learning that includes job-embedded opportunities for all staff to develop the knowledge and skills that are most effective for helping students achieve desired learning outcomes. The approach increases teachers' content expertise and promotes professional conversations about what to teach, how best to teach it, and how to adjust instruction to enable all students to meet the standards.

The following questions should guide the work to build this competency:

- Does the system set clear expectations for improving professional practice at all levels of the local system?
- Does the system ensure that professional learning opportunities are data driven?
- Does the system ensure that professional learning about research-based strategies is provided?
- Does the system provide adequate time for job-embedded professional learning that promotes collaboration and active participation?
- Does the system monitor the implementation and impact of new strategies and practices?

Building Relationships

Building relationships within the system does not happen serendipitously. District and school leaders must be deliberate in creating structures and processes that promote collaboration and collegiality. Ideally, teachers from different grade levels, subject areas, schools, and districts collaborate and network regularly with one another to share their knowledge, ideas, and strategies. Additionally, representatives from the school, district, families, and community work together on a common vision for improving schools.

Research demonstrates the importance of building professional relationships based on mutual respect and trust in the improvement process (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Within a context that supports change and inquiry, individuals throughout the system create a common vision and sense of community as they undertake challenges. Professional conversations about issues related to student achievement take place in an environment in which individuals feel free to ask questions and actively listen to others, thus building strong and productive relationships in districts and schools. The fundamental purpose of such interactions is to foster a shared understanding of and commitment to improvement efforts.

Low-performing districts and schools often need structures and processes for collaboration and professional conversations. Inadequate attention to building relationships prevents district and school leaders from knowing what

teachers and others need in order to implement changes in instructional practices. Additionally, teachers frequently receive mixed messages about expectations and have limited information about what is being taught or what instructional strategies are being used by other teachers in their own department or grade level.

District and school leadership teams need to provide effective structures for professional conversations and problem solving on issues central to student learning. The conversations provide insight on the needs of individuals at different levels of the system to accomplish the improvement work.

The following questions should guide the work to build this competency:

- Does the system have multiple structures and processes for individuals at different levels of the local system to have professional conversations?
- Does the system encourage positive interactions among staff members?
- Does the system encourage positive interactions among schools—both vertically and horizontally?
- Does the system encourage positive interactions between the district and the schools?
- Does the system encourage positive interactions between the district/schools and the community?

Responding to Changing Conditions

Educational systems today must adapt to myriad demographic, societal, economic, and political changes. National legislation, state accountability systems, parents, and other stakeholders exert pressure on districts and schools to change. The ability to respond effectively to changing conditions requires identifying and proactively addressing emerging or evolving issues that affect student achievement.

Typical changes that districts and schools confront include leadership transitions, resource allocation, availability of high-quality teachers, shifting demographics, state and local politics, and state and national policy. Districts and schools are better equipped to confront these and other pressures when individuals in the organization are aware of appropriate evidence-based solutions, and the organization promotes an atmosphere of continuous learning for adults as well as students.

The Working Systemically approach helps districts and schools shift from a reactive to a proactive stance and helps them make connections between changing conditions and their existing improvement efforts. Regular examination of a broad array of data helps to reveal emerging trends. This can allow staff to anticipate needed resources and explore research-based strategies to make decisions about how best to address the changing conditions.

The following questions should guide the work to build this competency:

- Does the system have processes for anticipating and recognizing changing conditions that affect multiple levels of the local system?
- Does the system promote and support innovations that help teachers and leaders respond to changing conditions?
- Does the system keep the focus on teaching and learning when conditions or circumstances change?
- Does the system seek current and relevant research and best practices to address changing conditions?

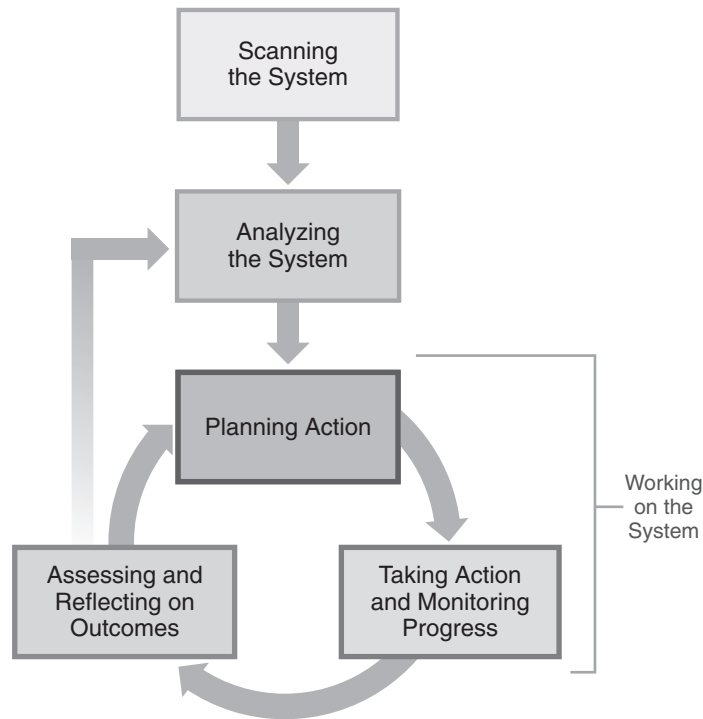
THE WORKING SYSTEMICALLY APPROACH IN ACTION

The multidimensional nature of the Working Systemically approach implies a dynamic interaction among its three aspects shown in Figure 1 on the opening page of this chapter. This book is written to provide guidance for sustainable improvement within three of the six levels of the educational system—the district, school, and classroom levels. Systemic improvement within these levels requires attention to how each of the levels affects and is affected by other levels. However, this does not mean that the national, state, and intermediate agency levels do not enter the picture. As work is being carried out at the local level, it is necessary to give attention to the national, state, and intermediate agency levels as well. For example, while the local system is often required to comply with requirements and policies at the national and state levels (e.g., national and state content and accountability standards), it can also be supported by these and other levels (e.g., intermediate agencies) through funding and access to research-based practices and technical assistance. Furthermore, intermediate agencies (e.g., education service centers, universities, social service organizations) are often called upon to provide services and technical assistance. A clear example of this interplay among the levels of the system becomes apparent in the current movement for national standards-based reform. State educational agencies and departments are increasingly called to adopt these national standards and to integrate them into their state accountability systems.

WORKING SYSTEMICALLY PHASES

This book describes, in brief, a five-phase process for implementing a systemic approach to improvement at the district, school, and classroom levels (i.e., the local system). The five phases provide a useful framework for understanding the work being done by district and school leadership teams. A more detailed description of steps in each phase, as well as specific guidance and additional

Figure 2 The Working Systemically Phases



resources, may be found in *Getting Serious About the System: A Fieldbook for District and School Leaders*. These phases, and their cyclical nature, are illustrated in Figure 2.

District and school leaders develop critical competencies as they progress through each phase of the Working Systemically approach. For example, in Phase II, Analyzing the System, leaders must develop a focus for improvement (create coherence), examine data (collect, interpret, and use data), and work collaboratively with one another (build relationships).

Table 1, the Phase and Competency Correlation Matrix, provides a guide to those competencies that receive primary attention during each phase of the Working Systemically approach. However, this does not mean that only those competencies indicated are being developed during any one phase. Opportunities will emerge throughout each phase to build other competencies as well because of the multifaceted, recursive, and contextual nature of the Working Systemically approach.

Table 1 Phase and Competency Correlation Matrix

Key to competencies:

Coherence (Creating coherence)

Data (Collecting, interpreting, and using data)

Professional Learning (Ensuring continuous professional learning)

Relationships (Building relationships)

Change (Responding to changing conditions)

PHASE	<i>Coherence</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Professional Learning</i>	<i>Relationships</i>	<i>Change</i>
<p>Phase I: Understanding Systemic Improvement Purpose: Develop an understanding of the systemic improvement process</p>		X		X	
<p>Phase II: Analyzing the System Purpose: Organize leadership teams that understand how the work will affect instructional practice to provide quality learning for all</p>	X	X		X	
<p>Phase III: Planning Action Purpose: Explore research-based strategies for providing quality learning for all and consider how actions can be incorporated into improvement plans; develop or revise improvement plan</p>	X	X	X		X
<p>Phase IV: Taking Action and Monitoring Implementation Purpose: Establish frameworks for meeting regularly, implementing strategies, and monitoring improvement efforts</p>	X	X	X	X	X
<p>Phase V: Assessing and Reflecting on Outcomes Purpose: Determine to what degree the improvement plan is being implemented and monitored; analyze actions in relation to intended outcomes</p>	X	X		X	X