

Learning From Experience

The Indiana Institute for School Leadership Teams

In almost any recipe for school improvement, leadership is a key ingredient. And yet districts across the country continue to struggle with chronically low-performing schools in need of more effective leadership. How can dynamic leaders be developed and their skills harnessed to make a difference for the schools most in need?

For answers, a new institute in Indiana has taken a direct approach: Ask the principals who've already succeeded.

Since 2008, WestEd has worked with the Indiana Department of Education to create and implement an initiative in which the state's lowest-performing schools learn from those who've overcome similar obstacles. Matching school leadership teams with Distinguished Principals who coach them for two years while continuing to run their own buildings, Indiana has shown that its worst schools can indeed meet high standards of learning.

"I think the story is that it can be done," says Distinguished Principal Stephen L. Foster, who has turned around one failing elementary school and guided two other transformations through the Indiana Institute for School Leadership Teams. "Those schools that have the resources and the desire to get better can get better."

In addition to raising test scores and dramatically changing school cultures, the initiative has repositioned failing schools as models of successful practices for others to adopt. According to Laura Cope, Title I Specialist with the Indiana Department of Education, the entire faculty in one school voluntarily signed a contract agreeing to stay at the school for three years so that teacher turnover would not disrupt improvements. In another school, teachers use Skype to confer with colleagues in the school run by the Distinguished Principal assigned to help both faculties.

"That frequent communication is key," Cope says. Through the institute, each Distinguished Principal is paid to visit the low-performing school four times per year. "But they really do daily emails and make connections and ask their staff to be mentors," Cope says. "They have instant credibility. They can say, 'I've been in your shoes and I know how you feel.'"

A Team-Based Approach

Indiana's leadership initiative started in 2008 after state officials asked WestEd for help designing a research-based model of school change based on teamwork and accountability. Cheryl Williams, Director of Outreach for Learning Innovations at WestEd, encouraged some key components:

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- **Team leadership.** While harnessing the power of dynamic school principals, the Indiana initiative also emphasizes that successful school leadership does not rely on a single person. Rather, it builds the capacity of many people to collaboratively steer school change.
- **Focus on data.** The process begins with a summer institute in which leadership teams from participating schools learn how to analyze school performance data, design interventions that are narrowly focused and consistent across the building, and build camaraderie. Teams continue to focus on data and make adjustments through the year.
- **District-level engagement.** Each school's leadership team includes at least one high-level district leader who can provide inside knowledge of the school system's policies and expectations as well as hear firsthand what barriers are preventing low-performing schools from achieving desired results.
- **Distinguished Principals.** Each leadership team receives coaching from a Distinguished Principal who works closely with the team during the summer academy and throughout the school year to help the group shape and implement its own improvement plans.

Building commitment has been integral to Indiana's success, Williams says. "If you think you can get commitment without people feeling they're part of the process, forget it. You'll get compliance but not commitment. You need to have a process in place to get you to success, and that process needs to address relationships across the leadership team and school."

Maintaining Focus

Like many states, Indiana has had to transform schools with similar academic challenges but different cultural traditions. In rural schools, teachers typically have strong roots in the community but may have outdated methods of instruction and no urgency to change. In contrast, urban schools often struggle with poverty, violence, and shifting priorities, so staff are distracted with more immediate concerns.

"One of the things clearly shown by research about the difference between low-performing and high-performing schools is that the latter are doing *fewer* things," notes Williams. "For some people, that's counterintuitive. But trying to do too many things creates a lack of focus and coherence. There are some very well-meaning people who don't give their interventions the time to take hold or provide the right level of support before they're off to the next thing."

Stephen Foster experienced the challenges of shifting priorities in his work at Lakeside Elementary School outside Indianapolis a decade ago. As the area's changing demographics resulted in the admission of more students from low-income and minority families, Lakeside's faculty didn't know how to adjust. Foster helped the school focus by using data to determine the most urgent needs. He showed faculty how to analyze data sources to determine which students were struggling and develop interventions addressing each child's needs.

A daily tutorial period enabled teachers to provide remediation for some students and enrichment for others. Foster also set up demonstration classrooms where colleagues could observe teachers skilled at designing small group lessons, conferring with students, or analyzing formative assessment results.



Building on Success, Learning From Mistakes

"We realized that it was very important for us as a staff, myself included, to accept being vulnerable and be able to say, 'I'm not getting it. Who can I go see to get help?'" Foster says. "It was not judging who was good or bad but who needed professional development and what kind." And instead of adopting a multitude of competing strategies, "when we found something that was working, we stuck with it."

By the time Foster was tapped to lead another struggling school, Lakeside had doubled its pass rate on the state's achievement tests and earned distinction as a national Blue Ribbon school. Since 2008, Foster has also guided two elementary schools participating in the Indiana Institute for School Leadership Teams. WestEd has provided critical support, he says, such as helping him sharpen his group facilitation skills and providing professional development unique to each school.

Foster says he always goes into a school wanting to learn about them and from them. Even failing schools have good practices to share, he says. He recalls one school that had posted learning standards in clear, kid-friendly language, which he immediately recognized as something his own school needed to do. The staff was pleased when he snapped photos of the graphics. Such reciprocal sharing and celebrating small victories can help colleagues build trust and develop stamina for the hard work of school transformation, Foster says.

"I think where things can fall down is if someone goes in and says, 'I have all the answers,'" he notes. "I don't tell people what to do. My job is to help staff look at the data so they can figure out what to do." At the same time, "I've got to walk the talk. I can't go to someone else's building and say, 'Have you thought about this and that?' if I'm not doing that in my own home."

Indiana's leadership initiative has had some growing pains. For example, based on the success demonstrated by the first group of schools, the state tripled the number of participants in the second year and found that it was too difficult to provide sufficient support to all. State leaders decided to narrow their efforts in the third year.

Likewise, Indiana is confronting two interrelated problems that continue to stymie other states: how to find enough principals experienced with school makeovers to coach others, and how to help the growing number of failing high schools. School improvement practices at the elementary level don't easily translate to the upper grades. And without new recruits for the Distinguished Principal ranks, states risk burnout with the ones they've come to rely on.

Sarah Pies, Title I Specialist with the Indiana Department of Education, says the state is already asking superintendents to nominate their "all-stars," and has been tapping assistant principals who've been involved with the Indiana Institute for School Leadership Teams and who may be ready for an expanded role.

Pies is optimistic about building on the successes of the leadership team initiative. "It creates hope in the schools that we didn't see when they first got involved in the initiative," she says. "They started out as the most struggling schools in Indiana, and they became the most hopeful."

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