

Study Shows SIIP Districts Making Progress

Two Connecticut school districts, striving to improve the quality of education as participants in the Center for School Change's Systemic Instructional Improvement Program (SIIP), are making significant progress. That's the latest finding of a study that has been conducted by Education Matters, Inc. for the past three years.

The two districts are among the seven districts, serving more than 45,000 students, that currently participate in the SIIP, which provides technical assistance and coaching to senior-level staff to help districts improve. The districts agreed to participate in the five-year evaluation in 2006. Since then, Education Matters – a prominent Cambridge, Massachusetts organization that has been studying school reform issues for 25 years – has been monitoring their efforts to restructure the way they work and focus on improved student achievement.

"We initiated this long-term study to learn a couple of things about our work," explains



Two

Andrew Lachman, executive director of the Center for School Change. "The Center has a very strong commitment to continuous improvement and the use of data to drive decision-making. We wanted a better sense of the extent to which our work with these representative SIIP districts was influencing improvements in the districts' adult and student performance. We also wanted to know how and to what extent professional development provided via the Superintendents' Network translates into improvements at the district level. The findings in Education Matters' most recent report indicate that we are on the right track."

Three Success Factors

The two districts have made great strides since 2006, according to Dr. Sarah Birkeland, senior research associate at Education Matters and principal investigator on the study. "Both districts are engaged in activities that research tells us are essential for achieving improved student outcomes district-wide over time," she says.

The principal measure by which Education Matters evaluates the districts is an ongoing assessment of how well they have adopted and are making ongoing improvement in

more than 30 "indicators of high performing educational systems" identified by the Center and confirmed by outside research.

The indicators cover a range of issues – from district leaders adopting and implementing a theory of action that impacts the instructional core and promotes student achievement,

to the use of data for organizational decisions, to districts planning and implementing successful leadership transitions – and are organized under seven broad themes:

- Systems Thinking
- Instructional Improvement
- Organizational Learning
- Accountability
- Leadership Development
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Sustainability

A Message from the Executive Director

Andrew Lachman

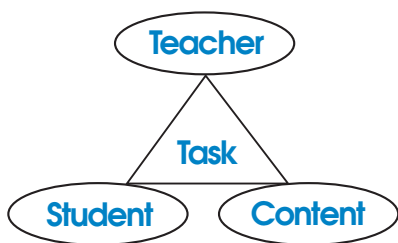
Building Capacity for System Change



“The work of transforming schools means all or most schools, and this means it is a system change. For system change to occur on a larger scale, we need schools learning from each other and districts learning from each other. We call this lateral capacity building and see it as absolutely crucial for system reform.”
– Michael Fullan

Fullan’s concept of lateral capacity building is one of the fundamental premises of the Center’s Systemic Instructional Improvement Program. SIIP was developed and implemented as a vehicle for changing the organizational conditions through which districts support instructional improvement. The Center’s program coordinators provide on-site technical assistance and coaching to key leaders in the SIIP partnership districts and co-facilitate a network for representatives from those districts who learn and solve problems together.

The focus of the improvement efforts is the instructional core: the relationship of teacher, student, and content which come together around the tasks the student is assigned.



In their new book, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, Liz City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel argue that increases in student learning occur only as a consequence of improvements in the level of content, teachers’ knowledge and skill, and student engagement. They also suggest that changes in any one component of the instructional core require changes in the other two (consider, for example, the implications of requiring algebra for all students). Furthermore, they note that if changes – in governance, structure, funding or the length of the school day – don’t directly impact the instructional core then they won’t make a real impact on student performance.

Large-scale instructional improvement requires that districts engage in three key actions:

- develop a clearly articulated – and widely held and understood – point of view on what high-quality teaching and learning look like,
- build a collaborative learning culture that fosters engagement, collaboration, and continuous learning for both adults and children, and
- develop and implement coherent systemwide strategies that support the kinds of teaching and learning districts want in all their classrooms for all their students.

Districts engaged in systemic instructional improvement must have a clear theory of action (a hypothesis about cause and effect that provides a framework for an improvement strategy: “if we do x, then we are likely to get y outcome”); focus on a few key strategies; and align financial, human resource, professional development, and accountability systems to successfully achieve the strategies.

The SIIP Network supports these district improvement efforts. The Network is composed of teams – assistant superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, and principals – from nine districts involved in SIIP. The Network goals are to deepen understanding about all aspects of systemic instructional improvement aimed at increasing student achievement, provide opportunities for continuous transfer and application of new learning to district instructional improvement work, and develop and nurture an active community of practice. Over the past three years, members of the Network have explored key topics related to systems thinking, leadership, and change. They have analyzed and explored program coherence, capacity, and accountability. Going forward, the Network will investigate what it takes to “scale up” and to sustain improvements by embedding them in the culture. Participants have worked with both theoretical frameworks and case studies which link theory to practice. In addition, members made their practice public by bringing their district work to the table for shared discussion and cross-district problem solving.

Systemic improvements focused on the instructional core don’t just happen. We’ve all heard the mantra that it takes a village to raise a child. Similarly, it takes a community of learners – within and across districts – to improve their practice, transform schools so they produce better outcomes for children, and achieve system reform.

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“I have seen, over the three years of the study, that the two districts have put more things in place under each of these categories,” says Birkeland. Both districts, for instance, have developed principal and teacher leadership and are more productively engaging stakeholders. They have made progress aligning district activities to theories of action. One has structured district-level operations to support ongoing improvement work and created new systems for ongoing organizational learning. The other has implemented a process for continuous improvement planning and re-shaped instructional rounds to support it.

As a central office administrator in one of the districts observed, “(In the past) school improvement plans were one-year things, and there was no reflective loop. I wanted to build in continuous improvement planning, just like the Center typically has. By putting this kind of planning in place, I’ve hooked it into theory of action. It is, in fact, your action plan.”

Qualitative in nature, the design of the five-year study enables Education Matters to scrutinize the two districts closely and consistently, and ensures a host of different perspectives are considered during the process. Superintendents, central office leaders, principals, coaches and other relevant school personnel are all interviewed every nine months. That generates a rich source of data about the districts’ ongoing evolution. Teachers are observed and interviewed every other year. Additionally, Education Matters reviews district documents related to instructional improvement efforts.

Leaders of both districts credit the Center with three factors that, they say, ensure the success of SIIP: providing an intellectual framework for their improvement efforts, ongoing Center support, and accountability mechanisms that ensure they remain focused on their goals.

Evolution of a Community

The intellectual framework is provided primarily through two groups – the Superintendents’ Network, the Center’s longstanding clinical study group of 26 Connecticut superintendents, and the related network of assistant superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction and principals who participate in the Systemic Instructional Improvement Program. Participants in that network have cited “tremendous improvement since 2005 in focus,

relevance, and depth of content” at network meetings, says Birkeland, and they agree that meetings are deeply valuable in allowing them to interact and collaborate with like-minded district leaders and in providing them with a “big picture” understanding of instructional improvement.

“We conduct a lot of in-depth interviews,” says Birkeland, “and we’re really seeing evidence of people in these districts

using the language and ideas of continuous improvement. In the three years since the study began there has been noticeable change in that sense. They have become part of a community that shares language.” Adopting such a shared vocabulary – evidence of collective under-

standing of and comfort with the district’s mission, strategy and tactics – is essential for a team to work collaboratively toward the goal.

The districts also give high marks to the Center’s program coordinators, who serve the SIIP districts as coaches. As a central office leader in one of the districts noted, “(Our coach) is fabulous at sitting back and watching the interactions and the conversations and the work, and then posing really tough questions to the principals and me.”

“District leaders tell us that the program coordinators really help them to put theories into practice,” says Birkeland. “They consistently say that it’s so important to have the eyes of someone outside the district who really understands what they are trying to accomplish, especially when the program coordinators understand the unique contexts of each district.”

It’s a significant point. While the Center is wholeheartedly committed to systemic instructional improvement, it is also acutely aware that one size does not fit all. As Birkeland noted in her recent progress report, “Over the past three years, the districts have followed very similar paths and struggled with very similar issues. However, superintendents are working with very different theories of action. . . .” One district’s theory of action is centrally focused. The other fosters more autonomy.

Having an accountability system, employing regular progress reports and meeting frequently were also central to the two districts’ success, district leaders acknowledged. “There was the sense, in interviews, of real pride in achieving SIIP results,” says Birkeland, “a sense of accountability not only to the Center, but to each other and to other districts participating in the SIIP.”

Leaders in both districts credit the Center with three factors that, they say, ensure the success of SIIP.

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“If I can look back over the past two or three years, I think my work has become much more focused,” said one of the SIIP superintendents. “I’m much more aware of the importance of connecting everything for people and not assuming that connections are made, of being very explicit. The SIIP grant has made a huge difference. It’s hard to describe how much the accountability to the Center – through the midyear evaluation, the final evaluation, the new proposal, talking with the evaluators – is a constant reminder that I have to be honest about the work that we’re doing. And I have to deliver.”

“There was the sense... of real pride in achieving SIIP results, a sense of accountability...”

Looking to the Future

“Evaluation of this sort is unusual,” Birkeland says. “Organizations like the Center for School Change are often required to undertake such studies, but it’s a real credit to

the Center that they initiated this study without obligation. They’ve asked for multiple reports each year and there is genuine interest in the findings. It’s wonderful to work with a client this way.”

The study will continue for two more years. This winter, Education Matters will return to the districts’ teachers and their classrooms. Going forward the study will look at how the districts consolidate progress and create systems to sustain improvement as SIIP partnerships wind down.

“Education Matters’ findings have shown that systemic instructional improvement is, indeed, possible,” says Lachman. “These districts have clearly made great strides developing and sustaining practices that will result in ongoing improvement. We look forward to evaluating the impact these changes are having on student learning outcomes.”

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