

# Overcoming the Challenges of School Improvement Through a Research-Based, Collaborative Approach

## Overview

Whether driven by inherent challenges affecting student performance or simply an aspiration to excel, schools want to do better. The challenge is finding a way to get there.

Too often, schools pursue a patchwork of programs that don't work and starting over from scratch when the desired results are not achieved or the funding runs out. Considering the investment in time and resources needed to increase student success and establish a culture of continuous improvement, it's important to seek evidence-based, systemic solutions that are also sustainable.

**Education Northwest is answering this call with a framework called Success Now! This approach focuses schools on achieving tangible and successive “quick wins” in teaching and learning while building lasting system capacity for sustained and equitable student outcomes.** The approach is rooted in research on effective schools, school turnaround, and school and systems change, and in our decades of experience working side by side with schools and districts on improvement.

## The Approach

Success Now! builds powerful, collective leadership that is highly focused on helping schools learn to solve immediate student learning challenges; at the same time, it helps schools strategically address specific conditions in the system that have hindered change efforts in the past. The approach works by engaging schools in straightforward, doable, and iterative change cycles that are designed by teachers and administrators working in collaboration and with coaching support from Education Northwest. Lasting 10 to 12 weeks each, these cycles examine the root causes of schoolwide challenges that impede students' academic performance and mobilize the entire building to implement research-based solutions. Teams also choose 2–3 system conditions to strengthen in support of each cycle. Cycles build from one to the next to help schools work systematically toward yearlong goals.

**Success Now! schools receive customized, technical support upfront from Education Northwest until they become proficient at engaging in change cycles on their own.** Coaches from Education Northwest also provide support in other ways, such as guiding teachers in the use of formative data so that they can monitor whether their instructional strategies are working and make changes if necessary. Coaches tailor their work with each school or district, drawing from a mix of deep content knowledge and system change expertise as well as extensive experience in applying the best research from school improvement.

## Rationale

**Shared leadership and collaboration focused on teaching and learning.** While school improvement models often emphasize the principal’s role as leader, savvy principals know the strengths of their staff and share responsibilities for leadership. According to Louis and colleagues (2010), collective forms of leadership have a stronger influence on student achievement than individual leadership. Collective leadership—also called distributed or shared leadership—is consistently identified in research as a key to continuous improvement (Aladjem et al., 2010; Lytle, 2012; Mujis et al., 2004).

Effective collective leadership requires many strong leaders who create the optimal conditions for student learning in their buildings. One condition that supports change in schools is a shared knowledge and understanding among all adults who work with students of how to structure and support learning and action, or, in other words, the presence of instructional leadership (Horng & Loeb, 2010; Kirtman, 2013; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). Research also finds that when principals become learners alongside teachers, it creates a learning environment that promotes inquiry and collective responsibility for improving teaching and learning (Bryk et al., 2010; Mourshed et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011).

In the Success Now! approach, leadership teams (typically consisting of administrators and teacher leaders, as well as counselors, instructional coaches, district administrators, parents, and others) receive customized training and support from Education Northwest on how to make school leadership inclusive and how to create conditions that support positive change. Success Now! coaches help leadership teams reject “either/or” thinking in favor of a “both/and” mind-set. School leaders who intentionally manage opposing viewpoints and find optimal ground for making and implementing choices in the change process maximize their chances for success (Parsley, Raphael, & Siebersma, 2014). In this model, principals serve as a leader of leaders by providing the structures, opportunities, expectations, and reinforcement needed for collective leadership to flourish. **Success Now! principals often report that their role in promoting change in a shared leadership environment helps them become better overall leaders.**

**Using data and cycles of inquiry to drive change.** To drive change, research suggests that relevant, accessible data and evidence be used systematically to improve instruction, and that this effort be embedded in cycles of instructional improvement (Hamilton et al., 2009). Components of these cycles may include setting goals, posing and answering questions about student progress to tailor instruction to individual student needs, and carefully setting and monitoring progress (Aladjem et al., 2010; Herman & Gribbons, 2001; Herman & Huberman, 2012; Levin, 2012; Robinson, 2011).

One of the key distinguishers for our change process is that every stage is informed by data and evidence use. In practice, however, many schools can get overwhelmed by data, getting mired in activities that prevent them from moving to action. Success Now! avoids this pitfall by engaging schools in short, inquiry-driven change cycles tightly focused on achieving manageable outcomes using “just enough” data. Schools set broad, yearlong targets, such as increasing math performance on an annual test. Teachers and school leaders then analyze and interpret a variety of available data and evidence to break this target down into smaller, more manageable, high-impact improvement goals, such as students increasing their proficiency at proportional reasoning, or being able to identify the main idea of a complex text and how it is developed through details and support. Teachers learn to be opportunistic about data, using existing classroom data, lesson plans, and their insights about their students to measure and monitor progress, making midcourse corrections as needed. They use research to break complex instructional strategies into smaller units of change they can implement with fidelity. These short, repeated cycles drive all improvement work at the school, not just in teaching and learning, but in making long-term adjustments to the overall health of the school system.

**Improving the system.** Many factors influence the success of school improvement efforts. The challenge is how to chip away at entrenched, underlying problems that inhibit improvement while at the same time further strengthening conditions that are already in place to help improvement efforts. Selecting common goals and maintaining a schoolwide focus for improvement can be problematic if teachers and leaders do not also mindfully attend to these system-level factors.

Based on a careful review of the research, Education Northwest has identified the most significant factors that can positively or negatively impact student outcomes into the change cycles that drive improvement in Success Now! These system conditions factors are grouped into four categories:

- 1. Teaching and Learning:** the school's technical core (e.g., curriculum, instruction, and assessment)
- 2. Sociocultural:** the human-centered individual and interpersonal factors in the system (e.g., collegiality, trust, collaboration, attitudes)
- 3. Structural and Procedural:** the technical structures and standard operating procedures of the school (e.g., scheduling, staffing, and allocation of tangible and intangible resources)
- 4. Family/Community:** the home-related factors and interactions, within the school's influence, that impact student learning (e.g., family engagement, culturally responsive instruction)

While many continuous improvement and school turnaround models neglect the all-important work of creating the right systemic conditions for change, Success Now! coaches guide school leaders in selecting and addressing a small number of conditions likely to hinder their progress. Schools are encouraged to focus on just two or three manageable actions during each change cycle. These actions are based on approaches found in the work of Bryk et al. (2010), Levine and Lezotte (1990), Sebring (2013), Spielberg (2011), and others. To increase schools' likelihood of success, Success Now! coaches can also bring in specialists from Education Northwest who have done extensive work addressing the specific challenges facing schools and communities.

Ultimately, continuous improvement requires a deep and long-term focus on improving student learning. Success Now! is designed to strengthen and deepen continuous improvement work without overwhelming the participants who engage in it. Not a piecemeal approach that involves disconnected initiatives and programs competing for staff attention, Success Now! results in an inquiry-based schoolwide learning community capable of improving student achievement one issue at a time.

**For more information about Success Now! call Mike Siebersma at 800.547.6339 or email Mike. Siebersma@educationnorthwest.org.**

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## Sample Project

A rural high school in Oregon used the Success Now! approach to tackle adolescent literacy and get a jump-start on implementing Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts and literacy.

Administrators and teacher leaders used readily available data to set a schoolwide focus on helping students accurately identify the main idea of a complex informational text and describe how that idea is developed through examples and supporting details. Teachers administered a preassessment to determine their students' baseline proficiency and then used the results to set a measurable and manageable student achievement goal of improved comprehension of complex informational texts.

Next, staff reviewed several research-based instructional solutions that address this learning challenge and selected one that uses graphic organizers to teach students reading comprehension strategies. "Because our teachers had experimented with graphic organizers in the past and knew more could be done with them, this appeared to us to be the instructional solution most likely to succeed at our school," explained the school's instructional coach.

After reaching consensus on this instructional solution, the leadership team identified two school conditions that needed to be strengthened in order for their instructional change effort to be successful. These included the identification of sample informational texts for use with students and targeted professional development for teachers. Addressing these conditions helped teachers—particularly core-subject teachers—quickly ramp up their ability to provide instruction using graphic organizers.

Armed with a solid plan for change, all teachers, including physical education and music teachers, collaborated to implement this approach schoolwide. They identified a set of grade-appropriate informational texts and collaborated on effective modeling and scaffolding. Throughout the 12-week change cycle, they refined their instructional approach using real-time, relevant data and student work. At the end of the change cycle, the school reported an 18.5 percent gain in the number of students able to identify the main idea in an informational text and explain its development.

Supported by Education Northwest coaches, this school did more than achieve an instructional quick win. School leaders planned and pursued a series of several schoolwide change cycles throughout the year, each building on the momentum of the previous cycle. This systematic planning and implementation served as a powerful motivator for teachers to achieve success in each cycle.

Additionally, school leaders focused throughout the year on building sustainable capacity for change at their building. They addressed the systemic factors they knew would influence the school's ability to improve student outcomes. These included strong communication and feedback loops for sharing consistent messages about the change effort and ensuring that teacher team time would be devoted to working toward the school's reading comprehension goal.