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The Logic of School Improvement, Turnaround, and Innovation

Sam Redding

The process of improving school performance has maintained a consistent logic at least since the advent of curriculum standards and state assessments in the 1990s. Over the past half-decade, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's (2009) charge for the nation to turn around its 5,000 lowest-achieving schools has introduced an impetus for innovation that may leaven the stolid logic. We are only now on the cusp of evaluative research, especially that related to the U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grant (SIG) and Investing in Innovation (I3) programs, research that will let us distill from the myriad of approaches those that may alter our understanding of how schools improve. This distillation of successful strategies will then legitimately carry the stamp of "innovation," as the new strategies alter the logic we have previously applied.

The logic of school improvement begins with a statement of the ultimate goal of K-12 (or preK-12) schooling. The conventional goal, echoed across the landscape of public education, is that all students will leave the 12th grade ready for college and careers. The true measure of this goal's attainment by a school system would be the degree of success in college and careers (over the course of a lifetime) attained by its graduates. Longitudinal studies of postsecondary success are enlightening, but not particularly useful in a school improvement process that requires more easily retrievable feedback on a school's effectiveness. For school improvement purposes, we turn to measurements of students' knowledge and skills within and upon exiting the school system.

Curriculum standards, including the Common Core State Standards, and graduation requirements articulate a body of knowledge and skill thought to prepare a student for college and career. State assessments and end-of-course tests provide measures of a student's acquisition of the necessary knowledge and

skills defined by the standards and graduation requirements. Preparation for college and career is a solid, practical, and utilitarian goal, and we have miles to go before achieving it for all students. In time, however, we may find the goal unduly narrow and incapable of encompassing all that we desire for our children's lives both during their school years and beyond senior year. We already know that social and emotional competencies, not commonly included in our catalog of necessary knowledge and skills, are essential to success in college and career as well as every other aspect of life.

A school system's performance is measured by what it adds to its students' knowledge and skills as evidenced in the state assessments, end-of-course tests, and fulfillment of graduation requirements. In other words, its students demonstrate their readiness for college and career by meeting standards, and the degree to which its students do so provides a summative metric for determining the school system's performance. Grade-level and subject benchmarks ladder the 12th grade standards down through the grades to kindergarten or prekindergarten so that each student's progress toward the ultimate standards and the system's goal can be tracked. The performance of each school in the system, and each grade level in the school, is thereby measured according to the benchmarked progress of students.

School improvement is the process by which the school adds to its students' knowledge and skills through intentional efforts to enhance school effectiveness. A productivity calculation determines how efficiently the school achieves its results—the ratio of school resource inputs to student outcomes. Intentional efforts to enhance school effectiveness and productivity include:

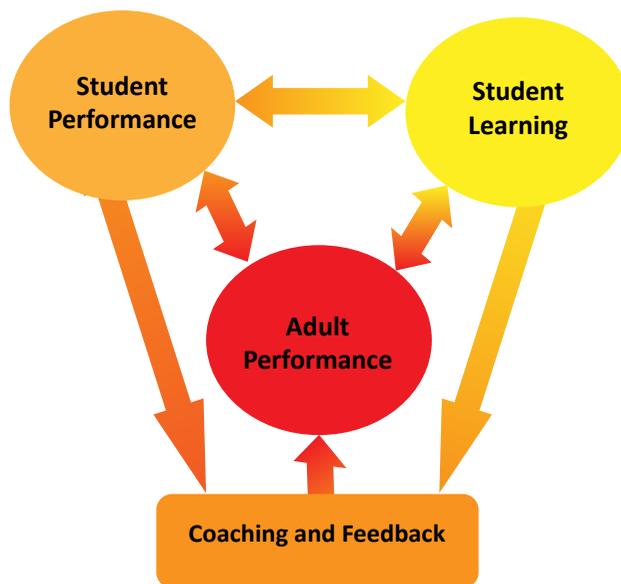
- a. **Variety and Choice:** allowing parents to choose the school their children attend in order to provide market incentives for the school to improve.
- b. **Governance:** changing the school's decision makers and/or decision-making processes.
- c. **Structure:** changing the way the school, its personnel, and its students are organized.
- d. **Program:** changing the school's curricular and co-curricular offerings.
- e. **Practice:** changing or improving the fidelity of implementation of professional practice by school personnel.

Parental choice and change in governance, structure, and program are all designed to ultimately improve the professional practice of school personnel, so change in practice is the core driver of school improvement. Professional practice is improved by increasing implementation fidelity to standard practice (the assumed most effective practice) or replacing the standard practice with a more effective practice, which is innovation.

Changing Adult Practice to Improve Student Learning

The bedrock of school improvement is change in adult professional practice, the chief contributor to student performance and gains in student learning. In its simplest form, this is accomplished through a process in which school personnel, in a culture of candor and trust, examine their practice and strive to improve it, typically facilitated by professional development and coaching. In this model, as illustrated in Figure 1, adult performance represents the degree to which professional personnel implement effective practice. Student performance stands for the work of the students in the learning process. Student learning is measured by summative assessments aligned with standards. Coaching and feedback are in response to data about all three components of the cycle and are directed primarily at adult performance in order to improve practice.

Figure 1: Interplay of Adult Performance, Student Performance, and Student Learning



Improvement Planning

The conventional school improvement process centers around a plan responding to student learning data, such as that derived from the assessment of students' progress relative to benchmarked standards, end-of-course tests, and graduation rates. The plan is revised annually as new student learning data become available. Typically, the school's administrators develop the annual plan for submission to the district and state, and the plan features a few major goals aligned with areas of deficiency revealed in the student data. Ideally, the administrators engage a representative team of teachers and stakeholders in reviewing the data and developing the plan. The annual school improvement plan (SIP) commonly introduces programmatic interventions (for example, new

curriculum, professional development, technology) to address its goals, with objectives defined for the interventions and outcome targets for the goals. Rarely does the plan address specific professional practices or provide targets and metrics for them. The programmatic interventions are assumed to change professional practice.

The conventional annual SIP has succeeded in focusing school personnel on student learning data, but has been less successful in linking the data back to the professional practices that led to the outcomes in the first place. Annual plans provide a strategic roadmap, but they are prone to becoming static and not facilitating the routine adjustments in course informed by frequent feedback loops. Further, the SIP process assumes that the school personnel are adept at constructing the right goals from analysis of the student data and aligning those goals with the programmatic interventions with the greatest impact. Layering on programmatic solutions often results in initiatives working at cross purposes and creates inextricable managerial webs that distract administrators and teachers from attention to the basic professional practices they intend to impact.

The annual SIP appears on its surface to comport with the tenets of performance management. “The basic structure of a performance management system is simple,” according to Betheny Gross and Ashley Jochim (2013, p. 3) of the Center on Reinventing Public Education and the national Building State Capacity and Productivity Center. Gross and Jochim proffer a simple three-part process for the structure of a performance management system: (1) set high performance standards and goals; (2) systematically assess performance and evaluate progress; and (3) improve or adapt. Where the annual SIP falls short is in its tendency to define “performance” only as student performance and not adult performance, thus giving too little attention to the change in discreet professional practices that, cumulatively, drive improvement. Also, the annual SIP rarely includes the metrics, feedback loops, and opportunities for ongoing adjustment in professional practice that move the dial on student learning. School improvement processes have recently adopted an indicator-based approach to improvement that bridges the ultimate goals to the more immediate, operational objectives that allow for nimble response.

Indicators as Performance Feedback

Students’ performance on standards-based assessments and their fulfillment of rigorous graduation requirements are *indications* of their readiness for college and career. In an improvement process, these student outcome measures are considered *lagging indicators* because they tend to follow changes in professional practice. In fact, changes in professional practice may themselves follow changes in school enrollment options, school governance, school structure, and programs designed to improve practice. So the lag in time can be considerable and not immediately useful as feedback in a nimble performance management

system. More immediate indications of change in professional practice, called *leading indicators*, include such quantifiable markers as student attendance, teacher attendance, discipline referrals, and formative assessments. Finally, the most direct indication of change in professional practice is the observable demonstration of these practices. These direct determinations of professional practice are *effective practice indicators*, also called *implementation indicators*.

The use of specific indicators of effective practice to guide and assess school improvement processes is derived from performance management methodology. This methodology emphasizes evidence-based procedures that achieve results as exemplified by Wiseman et al. (2007). Indicators are employed in many fields as intermediate and specific measures of more general concepts, and they are highly promising in education. See, for example, the performance management literature from the field of business, such as Frear and Paustian-Underdahl (2011).

Effective practice indicators state in plain language how the practice looks when observed. Observation includes direct witnessing of the practice as well as examination of documents that confirm the practice. For classroom instruction, an effective practice might be that *the school expects and monitors sound classroom management* (Redding, 2007a; Redding, 2007b), a practice based on research on the relationship between classroom management methods and student learning outcomes. Effective practice indicators could then describe classroom behaviors associated with this sound classroom management, such as:

- a. When waiting for assistance from the teacher, students are occupied with curriculum-related activities provided by the teacher.
- b. Transitions between instructional modes are brief and orderly.
- c. The teacher maintains well-organized student learning materials in the classroom.
- d. The teacher displays classroom rules and procedures in the classroom.
- e. The teacher corrects students who do not follow classroom rules and procedures.
- f. The teacher reinforces classroom rules and procedures by positively teaching them.

These indicators can be observed in a classroom, and by observing them in all classrooms, the patterns of professional practice for the school are calculated.

Another effective practice is that *the school has established a team structure with specific duties and time for instructional planning* (Redding, 2007a; Redding, 2007b), a practice based on research confirming the importance to student learning outcomes of instructional planning by teacher teams. Effective practice indicators for instructional planning by teacher teams might include:

- a. Teachers are organized into grade-level, grade-level cluster, or subject instructional teams.

- b. Instructional teams meet for blocks of time (4- to 6-hour blocks, once a month; whole days before and after the school year) sufficient to develop and refine units of instruction and review student learning data.
- c. Instructional teams develop standards-aligned units of instruction for each subject and grade level.
- d. Instructional teams use student learning data to plan instruction.
- e. Instructional teams review the results of formative assessments to make decisions about the curriculum and instructional plans and to “red flag” students in need of intervention (both students in need of tutoring or extra help and students needing enhanced learning opportunities because of early mastery of objectives).

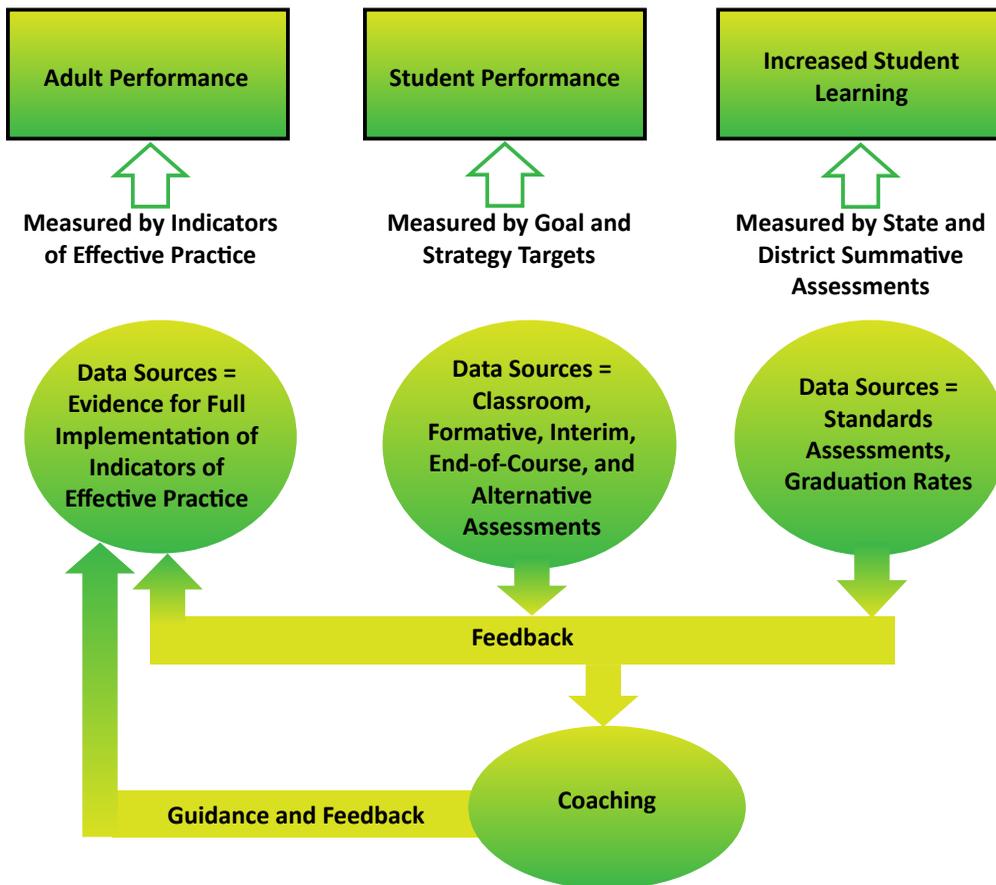
For these specific indicators of effective instructional team practices, a document review of the schedules, agendas, and work products of the teams would serve as confirmation of their implementation.

The indicator of effective practice is the finest grained metric for determining the level of effective practice in a school. To put this in perspective, school improvement might be organized by domain, practice, and indicators. For example, the domains might be leadership and decision making, professional development, curriculum, assessment, instructional planning, classroom instruction, classroom management, and family engagement. Within each domain, several effective practices would be cited, and for each effective practice, a number of specific, behavioral indicators given.

The school’s leadership team is the ideal vehicle for managing the improvement process (Louis et al., 2010). The leadership team assesses each indicator and determines if it is *fully* implemented, yielding a binary measure for each—yes or no. The percent of indicators fully implemented for an effective practice would quantify that practice’s degree of implementation. Likewise, the percent of indicators fully implemented for a domain would quantify that domain’s degree of implementation. Finally, a tally of the percent of indicators fully implemented across all domains would quantify the current status of the school. As indicators are reassessed, following efforts to reach their full implementation, the new tallies compared with the earlier assessments would provide a measure of change or improvement.

The leadership team cycles through this process of securing data to assess current practice, developing plans to reach full implementation, monitoring progress, and reassessing to confirm implementation. This cyclical process is similar in approach to that described by Wiseman et al. (2007), making sense within the context of the school and including actionable tasks, persons responsible, and timelines. Figure 2 illustrates this process for continuous school improvement.

Figure 2. Process of Continuous School Improvement



Improvement, Turnaround, and Innovation

Ratcheting up the degree of implementation of effective practice, as evidenced in achieving specific indicators, is a recursive process. It is premised upon the acceptance of standard (effective) practices and the school's candid efforts to assess current practice and improve upon it. Improvement implies an incremental process, while turnaround calls for more dramatic change. On a scale of intensity, a turnaround strategy, as opposed to an improvement strategy, would include a shorter timeline for change and the inclusion of practices and indicators based on evidence of successful turnaround. For example, the practices might be aligned with the seven turnaround principles identified by Redding (2012) and the U.S. Department of Education (2011), with the topics of the turnaround principles serving as domains of effective practice:

- a. **Leadership**: providing strong leadership by reviewing the performance of the current principal, replacing the current principal or ensuring the principal is a change leader, and providing the principal, with operational flexibility.

- b. **Effective Teachers:** ensuring that teachers are effective and able to improve instruction by reviewing all staff and retaining those determined to be effective; carefully selecting new teachers, including transfers; and providing job-embedded professional development informed by teacher evaluation.
- c. **Extended Learning Time:** redesigning the school day, week, or year to include additional time for student learning and teacher collaboration.
- d. **Strong Instruction:** strengthening the school's instructional program based on student needs and ensuring that the instructional program is research-based, rigorous, and aligned with state academic content standards.
- e. **Use of Data:** using data to inform instruction and for continuous improvement, including providing time for collaboration on the use of data
- f. **School Culture:** establishing a school environment that improves safety and discipline and addressing students' social, emotional, and physical health needs.
- g. **Family and Community Engagement:** providing ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement.

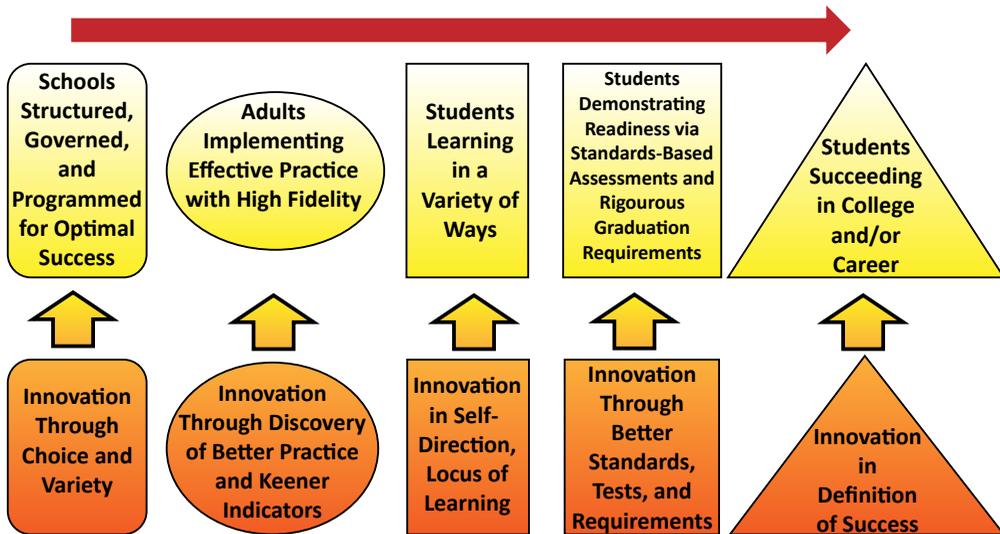
As evidence emerges from the great experiment of the recent School Improvement Grants, we will learn more about turnaround. In particular, we will know if school choice and change in governance, structure, and program are necessary precursors to improvement of practice. We will also know which practices provide the greatest leverage for dramatic improvement.

The U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (I3) grants will also begin yielding an evidence base for innovation, as will evaluation of the many innovations sponsored by private companies, states, and districts. We will look for innovation in practice, and we will redefine effective practices and their indicators accordingly.

The Center on Innovations in Learning, one of seven federally funded national content centers, is poised to interpret emerging research on innovative practice and assist the field in making prudent decisions about it. Simply arriving at a sound and widely accepted definition of innovation is not an easy task. In the field of education this is especially true, as educators look back at a history of seemingly good ideas gone fallow. But the advent of powerful new technologies, coupled with the evidence emerging from large-scale efforts to improve and transform schools, gives us reason for optimism.

Figure 3 shows schooling's path toward the ultimate goal of college and career readiness. It also illustrates the points at which innovation will disrupt convention and pave a new and better pathway.

Figure 3: Schooling's Path and Points of Innovation



Conclusion

The processes of school improvement, turnaround, and innovation are different but interrelated and reinforce each other. In continuous school improvement, we focus on fidelity to the implementation of evidence-based practice—doing well what we think we should do. In a turnaround situation, the pace of change is more rapid and the precursors for changed practice more dramatic. Innovation steps in from aside the process, looks at the currently recognized best (standard) practices, and discovers more effective practices that then replace the standards. What we learn from turnaround informs our understanding of school improvement, and the infusion of successful innovation raises the trajectory of improvement and turnaround. We are able to accomplish more than we realized.

Action Principles

- a. Establish an inventory of research-based practices with specific, behavioral indicators that describe their implementation.
- b. Charge the school leadership team with the responsibility for managing an improvement process based on the continuous assessment, implementation, and monitoring of effective practices and their indicators.
- c. Include three data sources in determining the school's progress: adult performance data, student performance data, and student learning data.
- d. Provide feedback for the continuous improvement process, including coaching by school improvement specialists and district personnel.
- e. Report progress periodically by generating reports of the ongoing work of the leadership team and the student learning outcomes.

- f. Gear the effective practices and indicators for schools in need of rapid improvement to turnaround strategies.
- g. Innovate by determining the power of particular professional practices and their indicators, and amend or replace the practices and indicators with ones deemed to have greater power.

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