

Plan Long *and* Short Term

Hugh Burkhardt for the Toolkit team

Draft for comment

Summary

This strategy focuses on tackling the fundamental mismatch between the timescales of politics (2–4 years) and of educational improvement ((10–20 years). It suggests that these can only be reconciled through a *sustained long-term plan* that also embraces *visible and worthwhile year-by-year goals*. It looks at key factors in such planning:

- appoint good people, and support them so they stay
- devise and, after wide consultation, adopt a specific-but-flexible 10–15 year plan, with costings for each stage
- build into this long-term plan specific year-by-year targets that can be used in political campaigns, for accountability, and for feedback to all the key groups in the system

This should inform other strategies.

Background

Any successful strategy for system improvement must reconcile two very different timescales:

election cycles: 2-4 years Elected politicians must have results to show the public before the next election that their initiatives have produced results.

educational improvement: 10-20 years Substantial improvement normally requires some profound changes in the well-grooved habits of diverse groups of professionals, and in the expectations of students and their parents. This takes longer. It involves teachers, principals, and system leadership continuing to develop new skills and strategies.

These timescales can only be reconciled through a *sustained long-term plan* that also embraces *visible and worthwhile year-by-year goals*. The key factors in achieving this are to:

- appoint good people and stick with them for a decade;**
- together devise and stick to a specific 10-15 year plan, with a provisional year-by-year budget** – one that matches *pressure* with *support* for each of the key groups, and is built into the system budget as an essential core item;
- build in short term achievable targets** that produce recognizable results.

This is not what school systems usually do. They often launch new externally-funded initiatives with no specific, costed long term plan for system-wide implementation if the initiative proves successful. Dissatisfied with progress, they tend to change the superintendent and upper administration every year or two. That, and the short term tactics that new superintendents naturally adopt (eg bringing in a new test, which ensures rising scores for a year or two as schools get used to it), removes any chance of substantial progress. Where short-term horizons and a search for a quick fixes dominate, long term progress is unlikely.

The strategy

Here we outline approaches to achieving the three elements A, B and C above. In doing so we point to other strategies in this Toolkit that provide more detailed models.

A. Appoint good people and stick with them for a decade

The aim is to establish a 5-10 year timescale in everyone's mind. There is thus a clear advantage in appointing someone:

- from a leadership team that has achieved some success *over a substantial period* in another school system
- who has a coherent, multi-year plan based on that experience, with realistic year-by-year targets (see B)

The person appointed should be offered a 10-year contract on the basis of that plan, reviewable after a probationary year and after 5 years. The key to attracting and retaining people of high-quality, as leaders and throughout the team, is credible assurance of substantial and continuing support for the improvement program that is to be developed.

B. Devise and adopt a specific, costed 5-10 year plan

This Toolkit offers a number of strategic approaches to *standards-based improvement* (*Building system capacity*, *Curriculum-led improvement*, *Assessment-led improvement*, *Professional development led improvement*), along with some stories from school systems that have used them. Of course, any such approach has to be adjusted to the circumstances, state of innovation-readiness, and local financial commitment of each system. Any successful plan will have to address all these three key elements (curriculum, assessment and professional development) in a coherent well-aligned way, along with other issues that arise when a complex human system is changing substantially.

Here we just list some of the elements in such a plan that will be important for its success:

- **pace and schedule:** The plan must recognize that the system is complex, that substantial improvement will involve the development of professional skills for all the key groups (teachers, principals, professional leadership and administration), and that this will be a gradual process with a decade timescale – not an immediate 'fix'. Since this and other aspects are unpredictable, the plan must be regularly reviewed, updated and improved in the light of feedback.
- **matched pressure and support:** Change will not happen without a *pattern of pressure and incentive* for each of the key players that make it advantageous for them to move in the intended direction. Change will not happen successfully without adequate *support* – support such that all involved can respond effectively to that pressure. (Systems regularly try to use pressure alone, because it is less expensive; pressure alone does not work)
- **capacity:** Few systems have enough people with the necessary skills to make a successful system-wide improvement in the short term. Developing, and retaining this capacity, is key to continuing improvement; it depends on building a climate of team excellence – and investing in it. The limited number of expert people is usually likely require a 'cascade' approach, where the central team works with lead teachers, who in turn work with their colleagues; making this approach work well requires processes and materials that are well-engineered (see eg *Balanced Assessment in Mathematics: the professional development series*)
- **feedback:** If any system is to improve, all those involved need to know "how they are doing" on a continuing basis. To be useful, feedback mechanisms need to

provide information that is rich, detailed and timely enough to guide the next steps in the improvement process. (For examples, test scores or other simple summative measures are useless for this purpose; in contrast, annotated student work on rich tasks, or observation reports on teaching by colleagues or coaches, can be highly informative)

- **investment:** Evidence from other fields (eg industry, medicine) is that significant change depends on investing 5%-15% of system turnover in research and development to support improvement (0.1% is typical of US education). This level of investment does *not* require budget increases on this scale; it can be achieved through the re-allocation of resources, notably teacher time. (The variable that dominates the cost of an education system is *average* class size, so 1 more student per class frees up a lot of funding; cost-benefit analysis here is essential)

C. Build in short term achievable targets

The political needs of school boards, and through them of superintendents, mean that there must be clear evidence of success in time for the next election. This need can be reconciled with the slower pace of substantial systemic improvement by having specific step-by-step targets within the long term improvement plan.

This will also benefit principals and teachers, too, by addressing one of the key defects of the education system – the poor formative feedback that it provides to the professionals who work in it, particularly teachers, on their own performance. There are various reasons for this including:

- test scores give little guidance on what a teacher needs to do to help students improve (the obvious approach, more practice on similar items, is known to be ineffective for low achievers, but *What should I do?*);
- the classroom remains very much a private place with very little feedback to the teacher that is detailed enough to be helpful – for example, *coaching* based on structured observation, with group support among the teachers involved;
- substantial scheduled time for classroom-focused professional development is rare.

Specific short-term foci, appropriately structured and linked to professional development support, will lead, year-by-year, to a gradual improvement in student performance

Short-term targets may be of various types, for example:

- an important new learning goal (e.g. interpretation and use of *line graphs of practical situations, estimating risks, use of spreadsheets,...*), each supported by a curriculum unit – students across a system achieving such a goal will yield a clear specific short-term improvement;
- a new student role in learning, visible to parents through observing students' homework.

These short-term goals should be:

- part of the long-term program (regularly updated in the light of feedback on progress and challenges);
- clearly identifiable to politicians and the public;
- of "obvious importance" to children's life and/or future work.

Strengths

- providing clear achievable year-by-year targets for all the key groups, with the funding and other support to make them achievable

- the feedback that these targets provide on individual and system progress – and the confidence that comes with it
- a directed sense of 'purpose for improvement' amid the 'Brownian motion' of systems as they are subject to incoherent blows. in this direction and that.

Likely challenges

Many will arise, for sure, including

- budget cuts that will require rescheduling
- changes of Superintendent, each appointed with "a new vision".
- State and Federal decisions that put pressures to teachers and school that do not support the plan, and may be in conflict with it
- loss of key staff from the program

The role of the long term plan is to maintain a sense of direction within the system that informs the handling of such challenges. (Recent experience in California, for example, shows that this can be done)