

A District Improvement Strategy for the Fairfield Public Schools

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For the past six months I have been learning as much as I can about the Fairfield Public Schools. As part of my “Entry Plan” I have conducted dozens of one-on-one and small group interviews, observed classroom instruction in every school, met with representatives from each PTA and read a wide range of documents to help me understand not only the current status of the Fairfield Public Schools, but also to understand the history, tradition and culture of this community and its school system.

In developing this document I have also drawn on my professional experience in education over the past 32 years and my 6 months of experience leading this school district and observing its operations first-hand. My learning about Fairfield and its public schools will continue. As that happens, undoubtedly strategies that, at this point, seem fruitful may not turn out to be so, and other strategies will be necessary. The ideas in this document, therefore, reflect my best thinking at this time but these ideas are subject to refinement in the future.

As I have said repeatedly at public appearances, our school system does not need a complete overhaul. It is a high-performing system on many common measures. We offer a comprehensive program in academics, arts and athletics. Our student performance measures are among the highest in the state. Hence, the urgency for change may be less immediate here than in other school systems.

However, in an ever-changing world, complacency sows the seeds for decline. Just a few examples – changes in the student population, changes in workforce requirements, changes in technology – illustrate that if we simply continue the status quo, our performance may not keep pace with the world.

If we have programs or systems that are working well, then continuing to support those programs or systems makes sense. Where we can grow and improve our programs or systems – that is where we can focus our change efforts. Given that we cannot focus on an unlimited number of initiatives, we need to focus our efforts on the change initiatives most likely to give us a good return on our investment of time, energy and resources.

One common thread through much of my entry plan discussions has been a sense of what I term “initiative fatigue.” Often, this feeling comes about because the school system takes on many disconnected change initiatives that cannot be implemented well. As a result, many change efforts fail to achieve the promised results and the resulting cynicism makes future change increasingly difficult to achieve. What I hope to outline here is a strategy to focus our energy for future changes – a lens, if you will, through which proposed changes will be viewed before implementation begins.

THE GOAL

Before we can begin to talk about change, we need to understand the goal – the end – we have in mind. My simple version reads like this:

Our goal is to ensure that all students acquire the skills and knowledge outlined in our comprehensive, rigorous instructional program.

In other words, we are here to improve student achievement. Offering a comprehensive, rigorous program is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to achieving this goal. We need to maintain a first-rate instructional program that ensures that students who master it are prepared for success in the 21st Century. The instructional program, as I see it, is not simply the academic courses, but encompasses, for example, displaying good character, problem-solving ability, collaboration skills and technological proficiency. It must be continually updated, which means weeding out obsolete elements that are no longer relevant to a 21st Century education. In other words, *what* we teach is critical – after all, doing a marvelous job of teaching the wrong content is not the outcome we want.

A truly premier school system ensures not only that the instructional program is first-rate, but also that all students achieve it. If we are to become a premier school system, our mission must be to “ensure” student success (not “hope” or “inspire” it). A truly premier school system targets success for all students.

MEASURING PROGRESS TOWARD THE GOAL

Given that our “end” is student learning, our progress toward that end needs to be measured in terms of student learning. Some examples of benchmarks that could be used to determine progress toward this goal are as follows (I invite discussion of additional measures or replacements of these suggestions):

- Percentage of student performance at Goal and at Advanced levels on CMT and CAPT
- Percentage of students performing at Basic or below on CMT and CAPT
- Number and percentage of students achieving 3 or higher on AP exams
- Number of students successfully completing a co-curricular program or activity (during school or after school)
- Percentage of students achieving their goals on Individualized Education Plans
- Percentage of students achieving the district standard on district-designed common assessments (meeting district standards on curriculum)
- Percentage of students achieving success in their first year of college
- Number of high school students needing credit recovery to graduate

These are neither precise targets nor an exhaustive list. For example, there is no measure of a student’s character development. They also represent data we may not be collecting currently. I bring them forward to lay out the general concept that we measure our success by examining data on student achievement. Determining the exact targets, timelines and measures is beyond the scope of this document. Improved student learning is the goal; everything else is a means to that end.

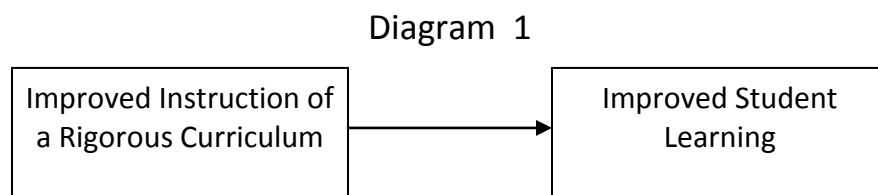
HOW TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL

Any strategy of improvement is, at its heart, based on a series of “if then” propositions that underlie the work. One may agree or disagree with these “if then” propositions; we may find that they seem correct now but are found to be inaccurate later. For example, we undertake professional development of teachers under the belief that if we improve the skills of teachers, then student learning will improve. Over time, that conditional statement has not always proven to work in practice. There may be a missing link in the chain – that is, something else that needs to occur to get the result one wants. In this case, it may be that the “if then” statement may be modified to state that if we improve the skill sets of teachers and if they change their instructional practices as a result, then student learning will improve. Hence, an improvement strategy is always subject to modification based on results.

The first underlying “if then” in this improvement strategy is this:

If we improve instruction, then student achievement will improve.

Diagram 1 shows this simple relationship.



Although this relationship sounds obvious, it is not clear that either educators or the general public actually fully believes it. Consider how often individuals will attribute student achievement results to factors other than instruction when asked to interpret results. Societal ills, video games, family background, the internet, home life and so forth are often listed as the primary factors influencing achievement.

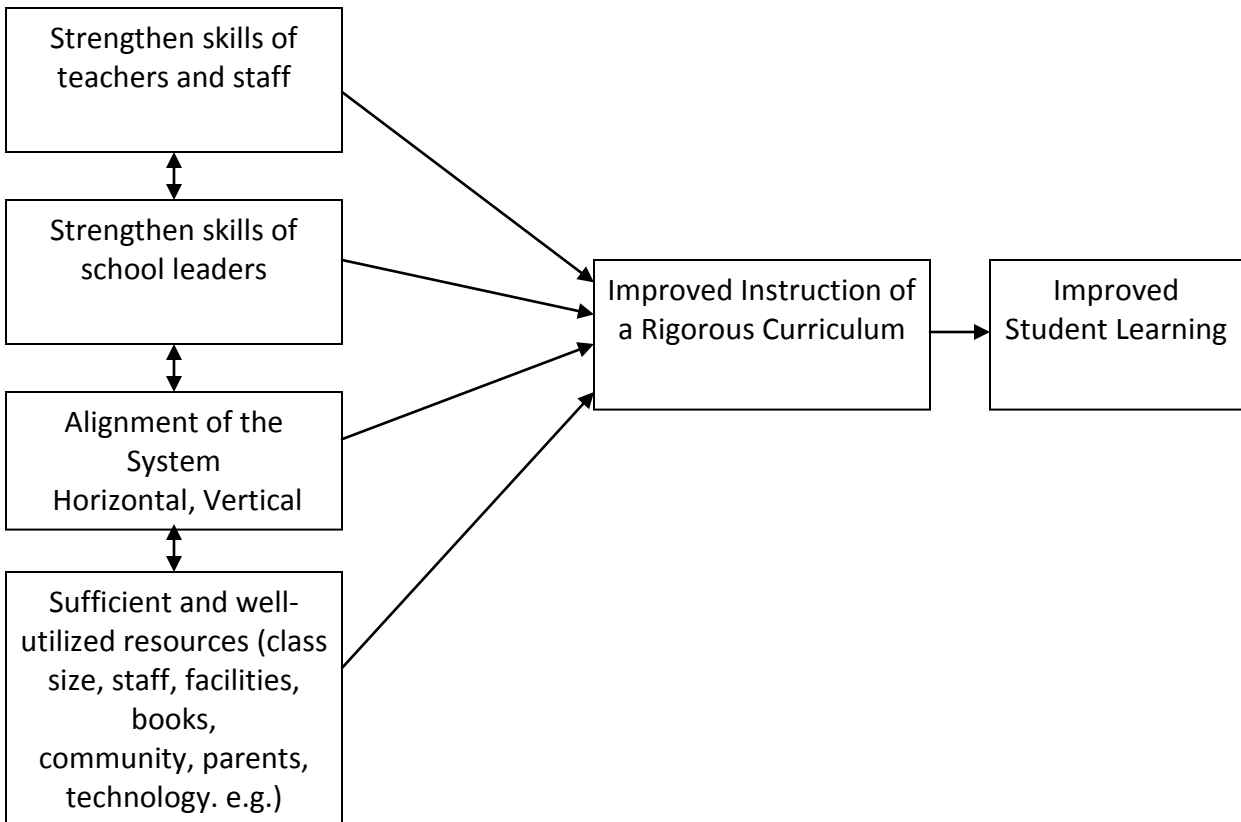
FOUR AREAS OF CONCENTRATION

The next step in building a district improvement strategy is to identify a limited number of focus areas that have the most promise for improving instruction. Every “good idea” can be linked somehow to improved instruction; the issue is which ideas have the greatest promise of showing gains in student learning for the resources we devote to implementing them. In the corporate world, terms such as “return on investment” or “cost-benefit analysis” would apply here. In our case, one of our scarcest resources is time. Money is another scarce resource but time is often more within our control.

Just because something takes little time or few resources does not mean that it is worth doing; similarly, just because something takes a large amount of time or resources does not mean it is not worth doing. It is the expected benefit (in terms of accomplishing our goal) in relationship to the time and resources spent that’s important. In other words, where is the best place to commit the time of our staff to get the greatest return in terms of student learning?

I see four broad strands that, were we to concentrate our resources and make significant progress in each of these areas, would pay significant dividends in improving classroom instruction and, therefore, improving student learning. They are Teacher Skills, School Leader Skills, System Alignment and Instructional Resources. Diagram 2 shows the connection.

Diagram 2



The verbal “if then” of this diagram reads like this:

If we strengthen the skills of teachers and staff, strengthen the skills of school leaders, ensure horizontal and vertical alignment of our system and have sufficient resources, then instruction will improve and student learning will increase.

One limitation of this graphic is that it does not display the interplay possible between each of the four boxes. Improved skills of school leaders, for instance, often will lead to improved skills of teachers and staff. Certain resources can lead to greater alignment of the system. Improved teacher skills can lead to greater alignment. Think of these four boxes as a connected set of change efforts rather than the discrete boxes that appear on this page.

For each of these areas, I will describe the specific area where there is room for growth; improvement efforts may overlap from one strand to another.

STRENGTHEN TEACHER SKILLS

The most direct route to improved learning is through the continuous development of teacher skills. We have many skilled teachers in Fairfield. Our student achievement results are very good. However, keeping teacher skills current is important because of the changes in the student population and expectations for student learning. Hiring the best and brightest is always a priority, but after hire, teachers need to continuously update their skills. For example, the demographics in Fairfield have changed over the past decade. The English Language Learner population is rising. Colleges and the workplace expect greater skill levels from our graduates than ten years ago. Technology continues to evolve, so teachers need to learn how to use instructional technology to improve student learning.

Another area for growth that relates not only to teacher skills but also to the other three focus areas is the analysis and use of student performance data, in particular by teams of teachers. We can make great strides in pinpointing where we need to improve student learning by looking at student performance data in a collaborative and systematic way. Our teachers need skills in collaboration and data analysis, timely access to meaningful data and the time to do this work well. Moreover, analysis of student performance data should be the driving force for the focus of professional development efforts.

STRENGTHEN SCHOOL LEADER SKILLS

Teachers need support in improving instruction. Principals, assistant principals, headmasters, housemasters and curriculum leaders/liaisons play a critical role in assuring that instruction in each classroom is of the highest possible quality. There are virtually no instances in the literature where a school has made sizeable gains in student achievement without a solid school principal. School leaders provide the balance of support and accountability required to improve instruction.

Principals need a skill set in analyzing and taking action based on student performance data. They need to be able to develop school improvement plans based on student data and work with teams of teachers to enable them to work collaboratively in developing new strategies for improved learning. They also need to be able to articulate a shared vision of what good instruction looks like in the classroom, and they need to be able to give feedback to teachers, collectively and individually, that will encourage teachers to continue effective practices and change ineffective ones. They also need to know how to support teams of teachers as they struggle through this new process; collaboration is a learned skill.

AN ALIGNED SYSTEM

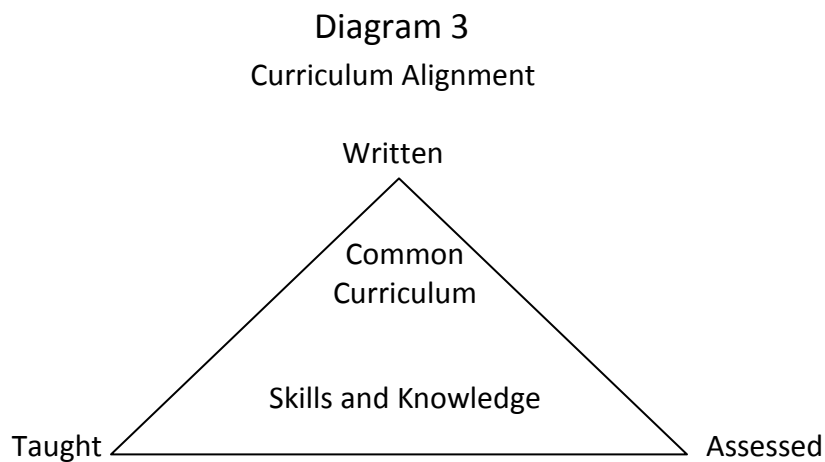
This strand has many components; most of the issues that parents, teachers, principals, Board members and community members mentioned to me fall into this bucket. Words such as “equity,” “consistency” and “fairness” were frequently used to describe some elements of the school system. In fact, aligning a system of 17 schools may be the central challenge facing us.

In the educational world, alignment can be thought of in two ways – so-called “horizontal” alignment and “vertical” alignment. Both are important to achieving our goal.

HORIZONTAL ALIGNMENT

This type of alignment means that there is a consistency in the educational program and resources across the same grade level and subject area. We have horizontal alignment when the curriculum being delivered in every second grade classroom across the district is consistent. We cannot expect students to master a rigorous instructional program (that is, our curriculum) if the written curriculum is not, in fact, the taught curriculum and the assessed curriculum. A teacher may be doing a great job of teaching and assessing a curriculum, but if it is not the one approved for that grade level or subject, we do not have alignment.

Alignment of assessment is a growth area for us. Common assessments are a good way to ensure consistent delivery of curriculum without constraining teacher flexibility in how they teach. Assessments must align to the written curriculum and the taught curriculum. Diagram 3 shows this relationship.



Horizontal alignment does not require identical teaching techniques or identical resources. Teachers need some latitude in their instructional styles as long as the approved curriculum is being implemented as designed. There are limits to the degree of variability, but consistency does not necessarily mean identical. One downside to a push for horizontal alignment is that it encroaches on some staff members freedom and, as such, can generate a negative reaction those who have been able to “do their own thing” with little thought for how it impacts learning across the school district.

Horizontal alignment can also relate to the equitable distribution of resources. Technology – both hardware and software – would be “Exhibit A” of this issue in Fairfield.

Responsibility for horizontal alignment often falls to district leaders, as it is their job to ensure the implementation of the instructional program system-wide. Principals can assure such alignment within their buildings, but the roles of curriculum leaders and central office leaders fall into this arena. Well-functioning grade level or subject area data teams can also bring about greater horizontal alignment within a school.

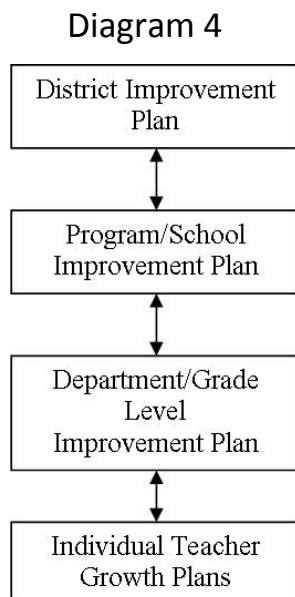
VERTICAL ALIGNMENT

A system that is “vertically” aligned has a consistent program of instruction from grade to grade. There are no gaps in student knowledge from one grade to the next and there is no unnecessary duplication of curriculum. The growth area for Fairfield in this arena appears to be at two transition points – from fifth grade to sixth grade and from eighth grade to ninth grade. Some districts experience an issue from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten but at this point that seems to be less of a concern than the two mentioned above.

The real power of vertical alignment can be seen when improvement efforts at all levels of the system are consistent. For example, when the vision of what good classroom instruction looks like in the eyes of the superintendent, director of curriculum, curriculum leader, principal and teacher is aligned, there is a greater probability of full implementation. When teachers receive “mixed signals” about what effective instruction consists of, one will not get full implementation. For example, a teacher may get advice on instruction from her principal, reading consultant, curriculum leader or Director of Elementary Education. If all of these individuals are not “on the same page,” then the teacher is confused.

The same is true of improvement plans in general. In an aligned world, elements of the district’s improvement plan are evident in the improvement plans of the schools and in the individual improvement plans of grade levels, departments and teachers. Each of these improvement plans may differ because, if done well, they are based on student performance data specific to that teacher, grade level or school. Working toward a common process of analyzing data at the teacher, grade level, school and district level that leads to an alignment of improvement plans would concentrate our resources throughout the system on the most critical areas.

Diagram 4 shows the vertical alignment of improvement plans. The arrows indicate that information flows in both directions to inform our practice. For example, if “differentiating instruction” is a district-wide improvement strategy, evidence of this practice should be evident throughout the system. Conversely, evidence from the “ground up” – the individual teacher level – can and should inform department/grade level/school strategies.



RESOURCES

Without a certain level of resources, all of the skills and alignment work may be limited in its effectiveness. Resources can include class size, additional staff to support struggling or advanced learners, books, materials, technology, software, adequate facilities as well as community and parent resources. The relationship between resources and student achievement does hinge on staff trained to use them effectively, hence the emphasis on teacher and school leader skills. Without adequate resources, however, the best-laid plans for improvement may fall flat.

In an era of limited financial resources, we need to assess the “return on investment” of our resources. Again, the “return” needs to be measured in terms of improved student learning as the outcome. With limited dollars, for example, are we better off investing in technology or people? The answer is not obvious nor is the answer always binary. Without the technological resources, for example, to provide teachers and principals with real-time data about student performance, we cannot implement a solid program of student performance data analysis.

A THEME

Concentrating our resources of time, energy and dollars into these four focus areas will yield the greatest impact on student learning. One theme across all four areas is the improved use of student performance data to drive our decision-making. For example:

- Implementing a district-and school-wide protocol in the use of student performance data to improve instruction and target services to children
- Implementing school improvement plans based on student performance data
- Implementing professional development for teachers based on student performance data
- The alignment of district, school, department, grade level and individual teacher objectives/goals based on student performance data

CONCLUSIONS

The school system provides outstanding learning opportunities for students. To ensure that all students master our rigorous curriculum, we need to concentrate our change efforts in the area that will provide the greatest leverage to improve instruction. I have identified four main “lenses” through which to view our current and any proposed change initiatives.

The district does suffer from a case of “initiative fatigue.” Sometimes this condition is caused by the district undertaking so many initiatives that none can be done well; sometimes it is caused by people not being able to understand how the many initiatives underway are tied to a bigger picture for change. I hope through this general framework for district improvement we may be able to tackle both parts of the problem. Change initiatives that do not directly and clearly address improvement in classroom instruction as outlined here can be phased out; at the same time, we can show how the remaining initiatives fit into the bigger structure by tying them directly to one of the four “lenses” outlined in this document.

Generally speaking, fewer change efforts done well are more effective than many change efforts done not as well. Concentrating the scarce resource of time in the areas where the “return” (in terms of student learning) on “investment” (in terms of time) is greatest is critical. Time is scarce because the day-to-day managing of a complex school system takes up a vast amount of teacher, school leader and district leader time. Carving out time to implement change initiatives is an important part of leading, but if the day-to-day managing of school begins to erode, then change efforts will be sidetracked. In addition, some change initiatives are required of the school district due to changes in state or federal law.

Despite these constraints, change is necessary. Before undertaking any new initiative, the decision-makers – whether they are the Board of Education, central office leaders, principals/headmasters, curriculum leaders, teachers – need to demand that the time invested in such an effort will likely have a significant and positive impact on improving instruction and therefore lead to our reaching our goal of ensuring that every student masters the skills and knowledge outlined in our rigorous instructional program.