



Standard Bearer Schools

The Standard Bearer Schools process is research based and designed to build and sustain highly effective schools. The standard being borne is that all activity at the school is driven by and examined in the context of student achievement and the organizational conditions that contribute to that achievement. Such schools have a clear and shared focus, high standards and expectations, effective leadership, a collaborative community, curriculum and instruction aligned to standards and assessments, frequent monitoring of teaching and learning, focused professional development, and parent involvement.

The Standard Bearer Schools are designed around three critical assumptions:

- *The district is a partner with each of its schools in the planning process.* If school improvement is to take place it is often necessary for central administrators to change their behavior—they must see themselves as working for the schools as well as for the superintendent. School improvement efforts must be more than compliance exercises. District central personnel must take responsibility for the effort; they must be proactive in helping schools secure the data and training they need to identify and address the problems that are impeding student achievement.
- *Good decisions are based on analysis of multiple measures of achievement and a variety of types of data.* Our work in schools and districts across the nation has taught us that districts are often data rich but information poor. Districts characteristically need assistance to turn vast amounts of existing data on student performance into information that can be used to markedly improve teaching and learning. And we know that despite the quantity of data available, districts often have gaps in the information that is necessary to make change.
- *School planning must address the root causes of underachievement, not merely the symptoms.* All too often school improvement planning addresses the symptoms, not the causes of problems. School improvement teams need to draw from a toolbox of widely used methods—including strategies that community developers, business and industry commonly use—to identify and address the root causes of school underperformance.

Methods and Activities

The Standard Bearer Schools process assists districts and schools to accomplish the following:

1. Identify and address the causes—rather than the symptoms—of prevailing levels of student achievement at schools.
2. Engage each school community—all teachers, all administrators, 30 percent or more of the parents and a representative number of students in grades 6 through 12—in analyzing the organizational conditions that are affecting student achievement.
3. Disaggregate and analyze data on student achievement in user friendly formats so that they can be used to inform school improvement planning.
4. Implement a multi-step planning and development process to link school and learning needs, their causes and school actions and initiatives.
5. Use school improvement plans to identify those recurring issues—across multiple sites—that require district intervention.
6. Establish functional links between curriculum and instruction, family and community engagement, professional development, and communications services to ensure effective, coordinated central office responsiveness to the instructional and organizational needs of schools.
7. Increase the capacity of principals, school teams and central administrative units to sustain increases in student learning.

There are three core components of the CTAC Standard Bearer improvement process—school improvement planning and implementation; comprehensive data analysis and strategic management. Standard Bearer School improvement planning starts with a thorough understanding of quantitative student achievement data. This must be supplemented with a thorough understanding of the organizational factors at the school—the school's conditions that most influence student achievement. School improvement planning is not an event that culminates with the production of a plan, but rather an integral way of doing business to assure that the performance of the schools and district continually improves. The core goal of our assistance is to ensure that the schools and districts can sustain the effort and carry it forward.

The Standard Bearer Schools components include:

School Improvement Planning and Implementation. To be effective, local school plans cannot be the typical school wish-list, but must be based upon an analysis of the current conditions *at each school* that promote or impede student achievement. This analysis must be based on both qualitative and quantitative data and must involve all the education stakeholders.

All members of the school community—teachers, parents, students, and administrators—must participate in the assessment of the data and agree on the emergent School Profile that describes conditions at the school and identifies the root causes of the conditions that most influence student achievement.

Thus, addressing the root causes, which have been identified by members of the school community, becomes the basis for setting school priorities for improving student achievement. This differs from traditional school planning processes which characteristically focus on the symptoms of school conditions. Engaging the full school community increases the accuracy of the assessment, engages the critical constituencies in finding solutions, and holds them responsible for implementing change and improvement strategies.

Comprehensive Data Analysis. The Standard Bearer Schools process relies on several tools and processes that are used to build the capacity of the district to identify, understand and address the root causes of school underperformance. These tools and processes are the: Comprehensive Data Analysis System; Organizational Assessment Survey; School Profile; and Root Cause Analysis. They are detailed below.

Comprehensive Data Analysis System (CDA). School planning teams must begin with a full package of achievement data—state achievement results and other district measures. Drawing upon these data, CTAC prepares and teaches the district and schools to use the Comprehensive Data Analysis System which includes, in graphic representation: the state assessment results, in the aggregate, by school by grade level and disaggregated by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, English language fluency, and disabilities—the categories in which the district and school are mandated to make adequate yearly progress—but also any other areas that the district and schools use and consider to be litmus tests of effectiveness. It is desirable, for both educational credibility and statistical validity, to have standardized achievement test data (e.g., WASL and other available assessments) as well as standards-based performance assessment data (i.e., state-mandated assessments) for each student.

These data are compared within the district and—where appropriate—the state context so that a school can see, for example, how its tenth graders perform compared to other tenth graders in the district and state. It is also helpful to compare the current year's data to two or more prior years' data, so that achievement trends can be identified and monitored. The CDA system also includes reliable benchmark or formative assessment data from the current and previous years and any other *consistently administered* achievement data, such as the SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement summaries. Multiple measures increase the accuracy and validity of the data analyses.

Where individual student and teacher identifiers are available and linked in the data system, the CDA system can include analyses of individual student growth over time and may include teacher performance analyses. Measurements of individual student growth render a clearer picture of the school's role in and contribution to student achievement.

Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS). Educators, parents, and children know that the conditions at their schools affect how much learning takes place. Educational research also shows that school and classroom conditions are powerful players in achievement, and they are the conditions over which the school has the most influence and capacity to change—as opposed to home conditions, for example. Organizational assessment is a means for identifying and addressing conditions at each school in the district. We use this survey of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members to develop a picture of the conditions of the school in nine areas known to impact school quality: climate; school planning, assessment and accountability; curriculum and instruction, teacher quality and evaluation; principal effectiveness and support; parent involvement; student involvement; and district support.

Survey results are then analyzed by school planning teams and faculties, with CTAC's on-site assistance, in order to understand and address perceptions about the effectiveness of the school. As planning teams work to identify root causes of underperformance, the OAS data provide a guide for where to look. An annual collection of these data also provides the school with a means of increasing the amount and impact of stakeholder involvement; and a way to document improvements in the perceptions of stakeholders about the effectiveness of the school as planners address areas of concern.

A strength of the OAS is that it is school-based—both the survey respondents and the data collection or administration of the survey. With a school-based effort, participation increases and schools feel more confidence and trust in the quality of the information collected. The Standard Bearer Schools process uses the data from the organizational assessment survey as the major qualitative tool for probing behind the student achievement data for possible explanations and ultimately root causes. Organizational assessment data grounds school improvement efforts in the realities of each school. With this foundation, schools have the knowledge and constituency support to improve the conditions of the school that most impact student learning.

The School Profile. The CDA data on student achievement, the OAS data on organizational conditions, and the school and district demographic data are compiled into a School Profile. The district and schools are directly involved in deciding what other data may be included in the profile. The objective is to provide the planning team with a comprehensive picture of school achievement and the conditions to be used to probe for explanations of the achievement and solutions for increasing achievement.

CTAC prepares the School Profiles, trains district and school leaders in their preparation and use. We also train the leaders in (1) how to use the profiles to probe for the causality of underperformance on an individual school basis, and (2) how to use the profiles from multiple schools to identify the recurring issues across the district that require a central administrative response. (Please see Appendix C at the end of this report for a sample school profile.)

Root Cause Analysis. How do planners get from data collection and examination to root cause? In the context of school improvement, causation is a term not used in the way a

physicist might use it. Cause here refers to the same meaning that each of us use in our daily lives to solve ordinary problems—the plumbing is backed up, the air conditioner is not cooling, the car won't start—why? It matters that the plumber can determine whether there is a tea towel in the household plumbing or a tree root in the exterior plumbing. Trial and error may eventually find causes of problems like these, but student performance is more complex, with many more variables to probe, and of course, trial and error is rarely a desirable strategy to use on students.

What strategies are useful in probing for root cause(s)? CTAC trains district and school leaders in several field-tested methodologies. These include several Total Quality Management tools that are useful to school planners such as the 5 Why's, Cause and Effect or Fishbone Diagram, and Flow Charts. In situations where there is emotional content to discuss, Edward DeBono's "Six Thinking Hats" may be the best initial strategy. There is a large bank of methods that organizations use in their improvement processes, which are tailored to the needs of individual schools.

Building Capacity to Get to Root Causes: An Explanation of CTAC's Ten-Step Process.

When school data are available, the school improvement team is selected, and the meeting schedule is established, the ten-step process for school planning can begin. Why ten steps? The process can be divided into fewer steps, but as good teachers know, when mastering a new process, it is often better to break it into several smaller steps.

Ten steps also are the most manageable within the span of the academic year and within the small blocks of planning time available in most schools. They are not intended for use as a checklist but rather as a heuristic or prompt to assist the planning team in being thorough. Two dates define the beginning and end of the planning timeline: (1) the date when annual assessment data are available in usable formats; and (2) the date when the school plan is due to be completed, which is usually established by the district or state.

1. Review state and local standards
2. Examine and analyze data.
3. Identify critical issues
4. Probe for causation.
5. Determine priorities for improvement.
6. Develop strategies.
7. Review current school plan.
8. Revise the school plan.
9. Share decisions and revise again as needed.
10. Implement the new plan.

School planning is a cyclical process rather than a linear one, as the steps suggest. It is *recursive* so that the planning team may return to an earlier step for clarification, focus, or re-direction. It is the recursive nature of school planning and implementation that allows schools to “get it right,” to make mid-course corrections as needed. Still another aspect of school planning is that the school team is implementing one plan while creating a new one. Thus, planning and implementing become overlapping cycles that touch at several points. Accordingly, by Step Seven, the current year’s plan is a prominent player in the new planning cycle for next year’s plan.

CTAC builds the capacity of the district and schools to assess and analyze trends in student achievement, disaggregate data and track the achievement of specific groups of students or in particular programs through this 10 step process. We assist each district and its selected schools in creating a complete analysis of student achievement as the basis for the next steps of school improvement planning and overall district strategic management.

Strategic Management. As issues emerge from the school improvement planning, and after completing the initial steps of the comprehensive data assessment and analysis, district leaders will have the quantitative and qualitative data from which to develop broad based system-wide priorities. They will be equipped to identify recurring issues —problems impeding student progress at multiple sites. The recurrence of these issues at multiple schools indicates that they are truly district-wide and require district level responses. *The challenge for district leadership is to apply the knowledge on school and district performance on a system-wide scale.*

Through the Standard Bearer Schools’ data analysis, organizational assessments, and inclusive planning, the district will be better equipped to develop strategies and priorities, and to realign management systems based on actual data on student achievement and school conditions. This creates a pathway for site improvement that is comprehensive, coherent and fully focused on students in each classroom. It also helps the district develop the capacity necessary to take the Standard Bearer Schools process to scale after the initial phase.

The result of strategic management —management that is based on data analysis and district-wide accountability— is an organization that is aligned to accomplish its goals. This is a fundamental requirement if student achievement is to increase to a level that eliminates the achievement gap.

CTAC’s technical assistance focuses on building the readiness and capacity to gather data, analyze trends and issues, plan strategies for improvement, allocate resources, evaluate results and make mid-course corrections based on the success of the initial strategies within the districts.

www.ctacusa.com/PDFs/Rpt-SBSGuide-2007.pdf