

The Ohio Improvement Process (OIP): Flavor of the Day or Impetus for Sustainable Improvement?

By Jim Lloyd, Brian McNulty, and Deborah Telfer

Over the past 15 months, Ohio's work to create a statewide system of support for improving student outcomes has gained recognition on a national and federal level, increasing support from key partners within the state and, most important, deeper understanding on the part of districts engaged in the work.

Those districts understand that the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) – the label used to describe a structured process based on the use of a connected set of tools – is Ohio's strategy for developing a true statewide system of support that can be used to redefine expectations for how people operate collectively and strategically across all levels of the education system.

The OIP is **not** the next "silver bullet," nor is it the goal of Ohio's collective efforts. Rather, it is a prompt for a different and much needed kind of dialogue at all levels – one that can be used to focus and set boundaries for local conversation in ways that allow adults to make collective decisions about where to spend their time, energy and resources in making and sustaining improvements in teaching and learning on a district-wide, regional, and statewide basis.

This article describes Ohio's work to create a state system of support, summarizes relevant research providing support for Ohio's approach, and features the involvement of one high-performing district – Olmsted Falls City Schools – and what district and school personnel are learning as a result of participation in the OIP.

SSOS, OIP, OLAC: What's In a Name?

While all states are required under NCLB to have a system of support for providing assistance to schools identified through states' accountability models as being *in need* of improvement, many states have developed systems of support that are exclusive in their focus on specific schools, programs, or funding sources (e.g., Title I). In contrast, Ohio has chosen to develop a statewide system of support that is accessible and applicable to *all* districts and schools across the state and that promotes large-scale change at all levels of the education enterprise by:

*In his book, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2007), Michael Fullan asserts that the difficulty of sustaining change at the classroom level occurs if other levels of the system (school, district, regional agencies, and state) don't change in ways that enhance coherence, alignment, connectedness, synergy, and capacity for continuous improvement.*

- ❖ **Emphasizing district role** and recognizing that each district and all the schools within that district are part of and need to operate as a system;
- ❖ **Redefining leadership** as being about the "improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role" (Elmore, 2006) and recognizing that improvement is everyone's responsibility – at all levels of the district and in all districts – thus requiring a common approach and focus across all programs/departments/offices within the district; and
- ❖ **Redefining "the system"** to include a focus on aligned and coherent actions at the school, district, region, and state levels and recognizing that the provision of consistent, high quality support to districts across Ohio involves minimizing or eliminating contradictory or conflicting directives.

There is growing support and agreement to focus on leadership as a set of essential practices that need to occur in an aligned and coherent fashion across all levels of the system through the effective development of team structures at the district, school, and teacher level. These practices, articulated by the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC) in the Ohio Leadership Development Framework, are providing the foundation for the

continued development and refinement of the OIP. The OIP, in turn, is providing a vehicle for enacting OLAC's work on multiple levels.

Leadership for Sustainable Improvement

OLAC's work, and the enactment of its work through the Ohio Improvement Process, is supported by recent research that underlies the importance of the following five key practices that must exist for any improvement to be sustained:

1. *Use data well*
2. *Limit and focus your goals*
3. *Develop shared instructional practices*
4. *Implement practices deeply*
5. *Monitor and provide feedback and support*

Use Data Well. While districts, schools, and individual teachers have been using data for some time now, too much emphasis has been placed only on performance on the state assessment. While these data are important, they provide little ongoing guidance to teachers or administrators. The focus of the OIP is on developing district-wide processes that allow for more collective use of relevant data to make smarter decisions, including the ongoing assessment of teaching and learning at the classroom, school, and district levels. These processes include the development, implementation, and ongoing use of teacher-developed shared, formative assessments, and the use of grade-level, departmental, course, and vertical teams to collaboratively score these shared assessments and plan for shared instruction. It would also include the use of building and district benchmark assessments. Fullan (2008) states that principals working directly with teachers in the use of data is more than twice as powerful as any other leadership dimension, and Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found that the reliability for assessing student learning and district decision making was one critical characteristic of effective districts.

Limit and Focus Your Goals. If you were to ask most teachers and administrators "What are the new initiatives that you've undertaken in the last year or two?" you're likely to end up with a litany of disconnected initiatives. If you asked them "What are the district or school improvement initiatives?" most of them could not tell you. Reeves (2006) refers to this problem as "initiative fatigue," while Fullan (2008) calls this "repetitive change syndrome." If teachers, schools, and districts are to make improvement then they must be allowed and encouraged to focus on a few critical things well. As Patterson, et. al. (2008) notes "a few behaviors can drive a lot of change... Enormous influence comes from focusing on just a few vital behaviors. (p.23). Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) recommend focusing the goals on student learning through the use of specific forms of instruction. They also recommend that the strategies be targeted on specific areas of low performance and phased in over time. Robinson (2008) identifies goal setting as one of the most critical school leadership responsibilities. The OLAC framework recommends identifying a limited number of goals and strategies that form the basis of one coherent district plan.

Develop Shared Instructional Practices. Over the last several decades the research on effective instructional practices has demonstrated that "not all instructional strategies are equal" (See Marzano et. al., 2001). A recent synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses provides clear guidance in this area (Hattie, 2009). While most educators understand these findings, school districts have had limited success at implementing them. Both Leithwood and Jantzi (2008), and Fullan (2008) recommend focusing on specific effective instructional practices as a part of the district's improvement process. Fullan (2008) says we need "relentless consistency" in the use of effective "non-negotiable" practices.

Implement Practices Deeply. Most of us can identify a whole host of initiatives that were undertaken with great fanfare but then implemented poorly. So the first step of any change initiative must begin with the realization that without consistent, rigorous follow through, there will be limited progress. As Bossidy and Charan (2002) have stated "leadership without the discipline of execution is incomplete and ineffective" (p. 34). All too often we achieve limited success and blame this on the intervention, while the real problem is the lack of full implementation. Reeves

(2006) documents the fact that we should not expect to achieve the outcomes identified in the research until we reach a 90% implementation level.

Monitor and Provide Feedback and Support. Even if we are successful in our implementation there must be a system in place to provide feedback. To develop the system we must first be clear about defining what the practices look like when they are being implemented well. This description can take the form of a rubric, checklist, or protocol, but it must clearly describe what the behavior looks like when it's being done well. Once you've defined these indicators there needs to be a monitoring and reporting schedule that informs everyone in the system as to the progress being made. The collection and reporting of these data comes in a feedback loop to the staff on the overall implementation level of the strategies and is described by Reeves (2006) as an inquiry process that is the most critical component of district and school continuous improvement. The second component includes the development and implementation of student progress indicators that have been collaboratively developed, and are collaboratively scored by the staff. Another important component is systems learning. At the grade-level, department, course, building, and district level we need to be able to answer these questions:

- Where are the practices being implemented well?
- Why are they being successful?
- Where are the practices not being implemented well?
- Why are they being unsuccessful?

OIP Web Tools Offer Efficiencies, Promote Shifts in Practice

The Ohio Leadership Development Framework outlines six areas of essential practice beginning with a more effective use of relevant data to make decisions about how to focus and follow through on a limited number of priority areas. The major tools used as part of the OIP are aligned and will be connected in a web-based environment, reducing the potential for error and providing districts/schools with an effective and efficient process for looking at their data; identifying needs based on those data; identifying focused goals, strategies, and actions; and monitoring implementation on an ongoing basis.

OIP: Promoting Shifts in Practice

<i>FROM</i>	<i>TO</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple initiatives are “in play” but are not implemented consistently from teacher to teacher, or building to building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A limited number of initiatives are implemented in every building and in every classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiatives are often contradictory from one program/department to another 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district maintains a singular focus by eliminating contradiction across programs/departments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiatives have little/no relationship to district goals/strategies/actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiatives implemented are directly related to the districts' focused goals and strategies and included as strategies/action within the Improvement Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring degree of implementation does not occur in any systematic way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic monitoring occurs at all levels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District does not evaluate effects on implementation on changes in adult practice or student performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district makes decisions regarding the effectiveness/impact of initiatives/strategies based on a regular review of monitoring data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared/collective ownership facilitated through parallel structures (DLT-BLT-teacher teams)

While state and federal law require districts and schools in improvement status to develop a needs assessment and an improvement plan, most current district plans are the work of a few individuals working in isolation. They generally do not address how the district intends to make/sustain improvement. Instead, they often identify only what the district *has* done and explain how it intends to expend available funds. Further,

most current district plans do not provide meaningful data for helping service providers (e.g., educational service centers) understand and respond to the needs of districts/schools.

The OIP can be used by superintendents and local boards as a prompt for collaborative needs analysis and focused planning, to get support for limiting the number of initiatives that exist throughout the district to only those that are most likely to be effective in addressing the district’s most critical needs, and to bring adults with multiple perspectives together to gain collective ownership for tackling the district’s problems.

High-Performing Districts and the OIP: Why Bother?

The notion of the comprehensive continuous improvement process (CCIP) is not new; indeed it has been around for quite some time. If you work in a high-performing district there is a high likelihood that you’ve utilized the CCIP – Ohio’s automated planning and funding tool – as a mechanism to “get your money.” Your district likely had its own strategic plan and you obtained a SAFE account through the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) as a means to an end — do the needs assessment that the ODE requires, utilize a number of “canned” goals produced by the web tool, get your CCIP consultant to approve it and begin allocating resources that may or may not be connected. Some high-performing districts may not even have a strategic or continuous improvement plan. In some cases, it is the central office, the assistant superintendent, or the curriculum director who determines how all of the resources obtained through the CCIP will be allocated. In many cases, the professional development that has been provided with these funds has not had the kind of sustaining power that is needed for a deep organizational change for the purpose of improving student learning to occur. The focus in some cases has been on the purchasing of programs—“we do DIBELS, we use the X-Y-Z reading program, we use the 1-2-3 intervention program, we use the E-D-G math program, we purchased a formative assessment program” and so on. This is the “elephant in the corner” of many rooms. It’s o.k. to admit it. We’ve all been guilty of this...program obsession is a difficult habit to break.

While there are programs that may be able to assist a district in its jump from good to great, too often program selection happens before a much needed collaborative inquiry to identify critical needs. Such an inquiry extends well beyond the typical student data analysis (the effect data). The more formidable, honest and district/building-changing conversations happen during the portion of the inquiry process that happens to be the most uncomfortable and, typically, the most unnatural. It does; however, happen to be the most important. The cause data analysis tries to capture the essence of what the adults in the system do (teachers, administrators, and so on) to impact or bring about the effect data.

Reeves (2002) introduced a brilliantly simplistic matrix called the L² Matrix that outlines a cause and effect analysis for student achievement that can serve as a useful tool for a very honest conversation among District Leadership Team (DLT) members.

Organizational results (Effect Data)	Lucky Good results, with no understanding of the reasons; replication of success not probable	Leading Good results, with clear understanding of the reasons; replication quite probable
	Losing Poor results, with no understanding of the reasons	Learning Poor results, with clear understanding of the reasons; replication of mistakes not probable

Antecedents of excellence (Cause Data)

The ultimate question for any higher performing district is, “why should I do this? Why bother?” As an extension of the work of the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council, the OIP offers all districts a structured

approach to begin to collaboratively explore effect data and link it with its cause(s). Like the above matrix, districts engaged in the OIP begin with a DLT whose members gather to ask and answer critical questions, such as “Are we lucky or are we leading?” “What implementation data do we have to suggest that we’ve moved beyond pockets of implementation excellence towards district-wide communities of excellent practice?”

Jim Lloyd, assistant superintendent of the Olmsted Falls City Schools in northeastern Ohio, has been part of a continuous improvement process in two high-performing districts for approximately 15 years. He believes that the district’s current work through the OIP represents the first time he’s had the opportunity to be engaged in a truly collaborative inquiry process through the use of a DLT. The OIP has provided the Olmsted Falls DLT the opportunity to practice true leadership, regardless of the participants’ role, allowing teachers and administrators to have very honest conversations about their problems and how to tackle them together.

Although Olmsted Falls has achieved the highest accountability rating on the State report card since its inception, it chose to become involved in the OIP to recognize the excellence achieved, celebrate it, and consider the next steps in order to building upon that excellence. Through participation in the OIP, the district was able to transition from a strategic plan that had far too many goals to a single coherent district plan with one goal — increased student achievement by 5% in reading, math, social studies and science. While the goal is important, it’s the district’s strategies, action steps and tasks that have been identified to move towards goal accomplishment that are most important.

Olmsted Falls’ involvement in the OIP has provided a structure for the district to diffuse leadership within a defined autonomous milieu. The DLT engaged in a collaborative process using the state-developed Decision Framework (DF) tool. Using the DF, the team looked at the adult causes that brought about the district’s achievement effect. The question always came back to, “how do we know that we’re implementing?” Any group of educated people can create a plan; implementing it with integrity is the greatest challenge that faces the education profession. The Olmsted Falls leadership believes that closing the implementation gap can be bridged by diffusing leadership and accountability to the building level.

This concept is where the OIP begins to separate itself from other “school improvement” frameworks. Through the OIP, the Building Leadership Team (BLT) engages in the same process as the DLT — looking at student achievement data (effect) and engaging in collaborative inquiry as to what adult behaviors (causes) brought about the effect data. The BLT then identifies any specific building actions and tasks that can be used to augment the goals and strategies created by the DLT.

In Olmsted Falls, four action steps were identified to move the district towards the accomplishment of its goal. These are to:

1. Provide professional development to increase teachers’ capacity to make the learning targets clearer for students and provide them with collaborative opportunities to share practices;
2. Provide professional development to increase teachers’ capacity to provide high quality feedback to students and provide them with collaborative opportunities to share practices;
3. Create a formative system to determine if the district is making progress in making the learning targets clearer for students; and
4. Meet in data teams to determine if students are achieving and making adequate progress/growth.

In short, Olmsted Falls’ focused actions are intended to make learning targets clearer for students, provide students with feedback during the learning process, determine if the learning targets have indeed been made clearer, and monitor the effect data. The role and function of BLT members in each school is to collaboratively determine how these actions are operationalized at the building level.

Given the education profession's poor track record in fully implementing focused strategies/actions, the district's newer approach, using the OIP, is to have those at the building level, within a defined autonomous structure, determine what commitments they are willing to make to one another for the purpose of (1) fully implementing what they've learned, and (2) monitoring the impact of that implementation on student learning. In Olmsted Falls, the DLT sets the non-negotiable strategies of *making learning targets clearer for students* and *providing students with high quality feedback before, during and after learning* (this is the defined part). Rather than mandating to each teacher in each building exactly how this should look, the DLT has empowered each BLT and grade-level team to collaboratively define how increased clarity and feedback will be achieved in their building (this is the autonomous part).

Olmsted Falls believes that by diffusing leadership and decision making within a defined structure, the probability of implementing the district's values within each classroom increases dramatically, and DLT members have seen evidence of the district moving from pockets of excellence to communities of practice.

In Olmsted Falls, district focus has increased through implementation of the OIP. Cause data are used purposefully and the district is centering on a limited set of aligned goals, strategies and actions. Through collaborative inquiry, district and school personnel have made strides towards developing shared instructional practices and have made a commitment to one another to deeply implement these practices. This kind of engagement has positioned the district to more intentional in aligning focused actions with desired results, increasing the likelihood of replicating success in each classroom and in each building. Most importantly, it has put those that matter most – teachers – in a positive, influential leadership role.

Such a district culture is not contingent upon an individual leader's presence in the district. If some of the administrators in the district were to vacate, those who do the work within the classrooms would continue to implement. Why? Because they believe in what they're doing and they've contributed to the creation of it. They would continue to visit each other's classrooms to build upon their individual and collective skills. Such practice is paramount for sustainable improvement.

The “Million Dollar” Question: Is the OIP Required?

Under Ohio's differentiated accountability model, which was approved by the United States Department of Education in July 2008, the OIP may be used as a required intervention to meet NCLB requirements. For districts in improvement status or those that have buildings in improvement status, the OIP removes the requirement that districts spend their time in corrective action/restructuring activities that are not related to their problems, while giving them time and the tools to review their data and make informed decisions.

For such districts, the OIP *is* required as an alternative to traditional NCLB sanctions (e.g., replacing building staff, significantly decrease management authority at the building level, restructure the internal organizational structure of the public school, etc.). See *Ohio's Differentiated Accountability Model: Promoting Flexibility, Innovation for District-wide Improvement of Instructional Practice and Student Performance* (October 2008) for additional information about Ohio's approved differentiated accountability model and the OIP. This downloadable brochure can be accessed at the following site:

<http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/OEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=590&ContentID=61276&Content=61875>

Districts that are *not* in improvement status are not required to implement the OIP, nor are they required to use OIP tools, such as the decision framework or implementation management/monitoring (IM/M) tool even though these tools will be part of the automated CCIP system beginning in summer 2009.

A Better Question: What's In It for Ohio?

The state system of support being developed through the OIP is a system for Ohio, *not* ODE. Its power lies in the potential to provide information and data at all levels of the system based on district-defined needs – data and information that can be used by regional providers and others to more meaningfully target technical assistance, support, and professional development to meet those needs.

But, the system won't reach its potential unless districts implement the OIP with integrity. The data resulting from district completion of stages one (identifying critical needs) and two (developing a focused plan) of the process will only be as good as the thought and consideration given to the process by district leadership team members. The role of the superintendent in this process cannot be understated; he/she sets the stage and expectation for staff participating in the process by her/his presence, interest, and level of commitment and support for the work.

Michael Tefs, superintendent of Wooster City Schools, describes the necessity of superintendents to “check their egos at the door” in implementing the OIP when he says that in order for the process to be implemented with integrity the superintendent must take a shared position as opposed to a lead role. He continued by saying that “collaboration and open, honest dialogue are an absolute must with this work, especially during the process of completing the decision framework.”



Michael Tefs

Development of a statewide system of support through the OIP continues to be a collaborative venture. The Ohio Educational Service Center Association (OESCA), educational service center partners, district partners, and numerous professional associations (e.g., Buckeye Association of School Administrators, Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators, Ohio Association of Administrators of State and Federal Education Programs) continue to devote time and attention to making the right connections for Ohio students through their participation in the development of the process, tools, and protocols that comprise the OIP.

For more information, contact your area state support team, educational service center, or the Ohio Department of Education, Center for School Improvement at 614.466.5834.

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