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A vehicle for enacting the work of the
Ohio Leadership Advisory Council:

The Ohio Improvement Process

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 ensuring a systematic and coherent approach for building all districts’ and schools’ capacity in real and meaningful ways.

The OIP 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 educators 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.

While all states are required under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to have a system of support for providing assistance to schools identified through states’ accountability models as being in need of improvement, Ohio has chosen to develop a statewide system of support that is accessible and applicable to all districts and schools across the state and promotes large-scale change at all levels of education by:

- **Emphasizing district role** and recognizing that each district and all 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—in all districts, at all levels—thus requiring a common approach and focus across all programs, departments and 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 manner 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. In turn, the OIP is providing a vehicle for enacting OLAC’s work on multiple levels.



Redefining Leadership for Improved Instructional Practice and Student Performance

Leadership for Sustainable Improvement

OLAC’s work, and the enactment of its work through the OIP, 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

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 better informed decisions. 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.

2) Limit and focus your goals

If teachers, schools and districts are to make improvement, then they must be allowed and encouraged to focus on a few critical things well. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) recommend focusing the goals on student learning through the use of specific forms of instruction and that the strategies be targeted on specific areas of low performance and phased in over time. The OLAC framework recommends identifying a limited number of goals and strategies that form the basis of one coherent district plan.

3) Develop shared instructional practices

Over the last several decades, the research on effective instructional practices has demonstrated that not all instructional strategies are equal (Marzano et al., 2001). 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.

4) Implement practices deeply

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.

5) 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 come 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: Promoting Shifts in Practice

FROM	TO
Multiple initiatives are “in play” but are not implemented consistently from teacher to teacher or building to building	A limited number of initiatives are implemented in every classroom and in every building
Initiatives are often contradictory from one program/department to another	The district maintains a singular focus by eliminating contradiction across programs/departments
Initiatives have little/no relationship to district goals/strategies/actions	Initiatives implemented are directly related to the district’s focused goals and strategies and included as strategies/action within the Improvement Plan
Monitoring degree of implementation does not occur in any systematic way	Systematic monitoring occurs at all levels
District does not evaluate effects of implementation on changes in adult practice or student performance	The district makes decisions regarding the effectiveness/impact of initiatives/strategies based on a regular review of monitoring data
Program ownership	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.



As an extension of OLAC's work, the OIP offers all districts a structured approach to begin to collaboratively explore effect data and link it with its cause(s). Reeves (2002) developed the L2 Matrix (left) as an aid in conducting this kind of cause-effect analyses.

High-Performing Districts and the OIP

The notion of the comprehensive continuous improvement process (CCIP), Ohio's automated planning and funding tool, is not new. Many high-performing districts have utilized the CCIP as a mechanism to secure funding. These districts may have had their own strategic plan and obtained a safe account through the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) as a means to an end: complete the required needs assessment, utilize a number of canned goals produced by the web tool, obtain approval from the district's CCIP consultant and begin allocating resources that may or may not be connected.

Some high-performing districts do not have a strategic or continuous improvement plan. In some cases, the central office, the assistant superintendent or the curriculum director determine how all of the resources obtained through the CCIP will be allocated. In many cases, the professional development provided with these funds does not have the kind of sustaining power that is needed for a deep organizational change to improve student learning.

In some cases, the focus has been on purchasing reading, math, intervention and formative assessment programs. And 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. The conversations that lead to district-/building-change typically happen during the most uncomfortable—but most important—portion of the inquiry process.

Districts engaged in the OIP begin with a DLT whose members gather to ask and answer critical questions using the Ohio Decision Framework (DF) tool. The DF provides a structure and sets boundaries for promoting open and honest dialogue among DLT members, thereby assisting them in more effectively reviewing relevant data and identifying and coming to agreement around the district's greatest needs.

Olmsted Falls City Schools

One high-performing district's build on excellence

Dr. Jim Lloyd, assistant superintendent of the Olmsted Falls City Schools, has been part of a continuous improvement process in two high-performing districts for approximately 15 years. While 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 and consider the next steps to build upon that excellence. Dr. Lloyd believes that Olmsted Falls' current work through the OIP represents the first time he's had the opportunity to be engaged in a collaborative inquiry process through the use of a DLT. The OIP has allowed the DLT to practice true leadership, regardless of the participant's role, allowing teachers and administrators to have honest conversations about their problems and how to tackle them together.

Through participation in the OIP, the district transitioned from a strategic plan with multiple goals to a single, coherent district plan with one goal—increased student achievement by 5% in reading, math, social studies and science.

District focus has increased through implementation of the OIP. Through collaborative inquiry, district and school personnel have made strides toward 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 be more intentional in aligning focused actions with desired results, increasing the likelihood of replicating success in each classroom and each building. Most importantly, it has put those that matter most—teachers—in a positive, influential leadership role.

The “Million Dollar” Question:

Is the OIP Required?

Under Ohio’s differentiated accountability model, 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 the time and 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 decreasing management authority at the building level, restructuring 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 www.ode.state.oh.us under Improvement.

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 the Ohio Department of Education. Its power lies in the potential to provide information and data at all levels of the system based on district-defined 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 DLT members. The role of the superintendent in this process cannot be understated; he/she sets the stage and expectation for staff participation in the process by her/his presence, interest and level of commitment and support for the work.

Michael Tefs, superintendent of Wooster City Schools, believes that in order for the process to be implemented with integrity the superintendent must take a shared position as opposed to a lead role. Collaboration and open, honest dialogue are an absolute must for this work, especially during the process of completing the decision framework.

Development of a statewide system of support through the OIP continues to be a collaborative venture. The Ohio Educational Service Center Association, 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 make the right connections for Ohio students through their participation in the development of 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.

To view a list of references, please visit www.OhioLeadership.org.



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