

## Further Reading

The publications and websites below contributed to the information presented in this issue brief and provide additional information to readers.

*The Georgia School Keys: Unlocking Excellence through the Georgia School Standards* (May 2007). Atlanta, GA: The Georgia Department of Education, School Improvement Division.

Hale, J (2007). *The Performance Consultant's Handbook: Tools and Techniques for Improving Organizations and People, Second Edition*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

Hulme, G. (November 2007). "Team-Based School Improvement: The Essentials." Atlanta, GA: *Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) Issue Brief*, 6:1.

Hulme, G. (February 2008). "Team-Based School Improvement: The Leader's Role." Atlanta, GA: *Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) Issue Brief*, 6:2.

Hulme, G. (May 2008). "Team-Based School Improvement: A Process Focused on Performance." Atlanta, GA: *Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) Issue Brief*, 6:3.

Page, D., et al. (2007). *Base Camp and Leadership Summit Curricula*. Atlanta, Georgia: Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement.

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# Issue Brief

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## Team-Based School Improvement: Solutions for Student Success

**T**his Issue Brief is the fourth in a four-part series on team-based school improvement. While the first brief (November 2007, Vol. 6, No. 1) focused on the big picture of what the leader needs to know and be able to do in order to lead team-based school improvement to achieve student success and organizational effectiveness, the second brief (February 2008, Vol. 6, No. 2) provided a guide for the leader to prepare for the success of team-based improvement. The third installment (May 2008, Vol. 6, No. 3) focused on the process of engaging and training an initial team in the team-based improvement process leading them through data analysis to the determination of the root causes of identified needs. This fourth and final installment continues to examine the process and focuses on cascading the work from the initial team to multiple other teams whose work is to verify the causes, collect additional data as needed and create solutions to be tested, implemented and monitored to achieve increased student learning and performance.

As outlined in the previous Issue Brief, the leader has guided an initial team through the process of analyzing multiple data sets to identify a student learning need, establishing a balanced set of performance measures, setting and refining a SMART goal that includes a baseline and three year targets, and determining the root causes of the identified need. The leader ensured that the members of this initial team each brought role strength, had a proven track record of success and had experience in or the capacity to lead subsequent teams.

This investment in training an initial team by the leader is important because each team member on the first team is now ready to apply this learning as he or she assembles and guides another team to determine solutions. Over time, this consistent process of cascading and guiding teamwork will result in all staff and a critical mass of key stakeholders having the opportunity to serve on

a dynamic team for school improvement. Dynamic teams arise and dissolve as needed to study and solve school issues. It is prudent for the leader to retain the initial team as an ongoing strategic team to ensure continuity and oversight as multiple dynamic teams work to solve identified root causes of identified needs.

In the previous Issue Brief, the need identified by the team was the 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading performance of students with disabilities on the CRCT. Based on their performance measures, baseline and three year targets, the team set this SMART goal: *We will improve the student performance of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students with disabilities from a baseline of 45 percent meeting expectations in reading in 2008 to 55 percent by 2009, 65 percent by 2010, and 75 percent by 2011.* When coupled with the "exceeds reading standards" data, the team predicts substantive student performance progress.

### Deciding Upon Causes for Solution

Let's assume the first team utilized one or more quality tools (as described in the previous Issue Brief) to identify and validate this set of high priority causes behind low 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading performance by students with disabilities (SWD). High Priority Causes of Low 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading Performance by SWD are:

- Many 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers do not expect SWD to meet high reading standards.
- Many 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers simply do not believe that SWD can meet high reading standards.
- SWD are unaware of the reading standards they must master.
- Reading lessons do not align with the high reading standards on which students are tested.
- Many 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers do not possess strong reading content knowledge.
- Eighth grade teachers do not differentiate reading instruction for SWD.

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- SWD are frequently pulled out during reading instruction for other interventions.
- Teachers are not yet fully trained in the newly adopted reading textbook and recommended interventions.
- There are no reading coaches to provide feedback and support to teachers.
- The administration does not hold 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers accountable for the performance of 8<sup>th</sup> grade SWD.

Once the initial team has determined the high leverage causes, each team member is ready to assume responsibility for leading another team to solve a specific cause or set of causes. It is important for the leader to allow the initial team members to have a voice in deciding who leads which cause (or set of causes). By utilizing a strengths-based approach, team members are apt to select a cause in which they have expertise, passion or a willingness to learn with their team.

In this scenario, after much discussion, the initial team decided that the first two causes did not lend themselves to a team-based approach as these causes did not seem likely to be resolved by peers. It is important to ensure that the causes assigned are within the control of the team. With their leader, team members decided that each member would take one of the remaining causes to tackle with a subsequent team—each led by one member of the initial team. The final cause, related to the administration, would be led by an assistant principal on the team and the subsequent team would include both teachers and administrators. It is important to communicate that the solutions generated by the dynamic teams will be presented to the initial strategic team for approval. In other words, the subsequent dynamic teams assume an advisory role as they accept a cause for deeper study and solution recommendations.

### Selecting, Orienting and Training the Dynamic Teams

The leader should make sure that the initial team members' first foray into the leadership of a dynamic solution team is successful; therefore, the leader will want to provide guidance and protocols to help these new leaders. Many of the same activities in which the initial team engaged are suitable for the solution teams. For example, it will be necessary for these new leaders to take a strengths-based approach to selecting team members, to ensure that all 8 Roles of School Leaders™ (Page, et al., 2007) are represented, and that team norms are established. The new leaders will want to include a parent, community members, students or other key stakeholder groups in the mix as needed to ensure the team has the expertise it needs. (See previous Issue Briefs in this series.)

### Supporting Dynamic Teams to Study Causes

The new leaders will support their dynamic teams, working at their level in the school, to conduct deeper data and cause analysis. Remember that the newly formed dynamic team needs an opportunity to come to the same conclusions as did the initial team or to suggest a revision to the identified root cause. This is where the adage, “the people closest to the problem know it best,” comes into play. The leader must coach the new leader to take the newly formed dynamic team through data analysis and cause analysis to allow the dynamic team to “own” the need or “amend” the need. (See Issue Brief, May 2008.) Once the dynamic team has an opportunity to study the problem under discussion deeply and to embrace the cause as a “real” cause or modify it slightly based on their analysis, and not before, the team is ready to develop potential solutions.

### Defining Potential Solutions and Developing Action Plans

Under the guidance of the leader, the new leaders have successfully kept the newly formed dynamic team from jumping to solutions prematurely. Once the assigned cause has been deeply studied and validated, the dynamic team is ready to brainstorm potential solutions. Utilizing the same guidelines explained in the previous Issue Brief, the new leader sets the ground rules for successful brainstorming.

Imagine that the assigned cause for a dynamic team is “Reading lessons do not align with the high reading standards on which students are tested.” Given that the team is convinced that teachers simply do not have the knowledge and skills needed to perform well, their brainstorm list might include items such as:

- Train teachers in identifying reading standards.
- Guide teachers to unpack the standards so teachers truly understand what they need to teach students.
- Train teachers in how to align reading lessons to the identified reading standards.
- Train teachers in how to check each other's lessons to ensure alignment with reading standards.
- Set up mutual planning time for grade 8 reading teachers to work together on a cohesive strategy to make sure lessons are aligned to standards.
- Establish a “learning buddy system” for support and peer observation between training sessions.
- Invite an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher whose lessons consistently align with standards to share tips and provide consultation with peers who are learning.

These capacity building interventions are appropriate given that the teachers have a knowledge and/or skills gap. However, encourage the team to consider other types of interventions. Judith Hale (2007) outlines several other kinds of interventions to think through, such as: information (e.g., Are expectations clear to teachers?), consequences (e.g., What are the incentives for or consequences of not aligning lessons with standards?), design (e.g., Does anything in the standards

process need to be re-organized or re-designed?), action (e.g., What can be done to stir teachers to action around this cause?).

Before deciding upon the final slate of proposed solutions, the new leader will want to make sure that the dynamic team is learning all it can about the issue at hand. An unyielding focus on performance by teams necessarily engages teams in ongoing learning. Encourage new leaders to engage their dynamic teams in reviewing the reading standards themselves, engaging in conversations about standards, consulting the *Georgia School Keys* (GaDOE, May 2007), reviewing data to determine teachers who are successful in aligning lessons with standards and examining ways in which lessons can be aligned successfully. In doing so, the new leader will be assured that the team learns and is more informed as they begin to develop solutions.

As the team learns more, members will likely refine their list and be poised to develop specific steps that can be taken. The leader can provide the new leaders with an action plan form so that all teams' solutions are captured in a common format. The form need not be complicated. It can simply capture the “who, what, where, when and how” of potential solutions being recommended for review by the initial team. As the dynamic team is crafting their action plan, the new leader should remind the team that any approved potential solutions will be tested using a plan-do-check-act cycle in order to determine the degree to which their proposed solutions work.

### Reviewing and Developing Potential Solutions

The leader may want to set up a due date or rotating cycle whereby each dynamic team's solution(s) will be reviewed by the initial team. The leader must help the initial team members assess the feasibility of the proposed solution(s). By developing a feasibility checklist, the leader will ensure that all teams' proposed solutions are reviewed consistently. Feasibility items may include cost, return on investment, compatibility with the current culture, perception as “doable,” long-term support, potential for long-term funding, or other relevant issues. The leader may want to invite the initial team to develop and reach consensus on the feasibility checklist prior to applying it to each team's suite of solutions.

The result of the review should be communicated to the dynamic team in a timely manner. Obviously, when the teams' solutions are “approved” or “approved pending revision,” this approval communicates the value they contribute. If properly guided, team ideas should seldom if ever be rejected. The leader will want to monitor

teams' progress with the new leaders throughout the process to ensure the teams' success.

Once solutions are approved, the new leader will help the team develop their potential solution by creating a detailed project plan and possibly a communication plan. The leader will again guide the new leaders in helping their teams identify any barriers to implementation of their solutions and to identify needed interventions that resolve the barriers.

A key component of developing the approved solution(s) is to help the dynamic team set adoption measures for their solutions. The new leader will want to review the performance measures set by the initial team with the dynamic team. These performance measures or “lagging indicators” can only be achieved if the solutions the dynamic teams are proposing are fully implemented. If the solutions work well, the initial team and dynamic teams are betting that the performance measures will improve. In order to be sure that the solutions are fully implemented, the dynamic team needs to set up measures to monitor the implementation of the solutions. They must agree upon a set of adoption measures or “leading indicators” so others will be able to gauge the degree to which their solutions are actually adopted and implemented.

For example, if one of the solutions is to train teachers in how to align their reading lessons with identified reading standards, then one measure would be that 100 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading teachers participate in this training. If there are ten 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading teachers, ten need to complete this essential training. Once the adoption measures are set, leaders must monitor and be sure that this proposed solution is fully implemented or document why it is not. Solutions and interventions only work if they are implemented (Hale, 2007).

### Supporting Improvement

It falls to the leader (usually the principal) to measure and monitor the change, reward and recognize results and progress, address barriers and under-performance and celebrate team successes. When teamwork becomes “the way we do things around here,” teams embrace the discipline and focus of the leader as their own. When their strengths and talents contribute to school improvement, staff and key stakeholder groups take pride in shared accomplishments. The pervasive use of team-based school improvement transforms school culture so that people hold one another accountable for solutions that lead to student success and organizational effectiveness. ■