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Introduction

The average teacher makes 1,500 educational decisions per day (TeachThought Staff, 2016). Or, said another way, teachers make four educational decisions every minute of their working day. Some of these are relatively minor, such as “Can I have more time to finish my project?” Others are much more complex, such as “Should I ask students if they are okay?” or “Do I offer scaffolds or allow the student to struggle a bit more?”

Given this reality, many leaders are reluctant to invite teachers and other staff members into leadership and decision-making. The mindset is that teachers and staff already have enough on their metaphoric plates. As a result, some leaders assume all the responsibility for administrative decisions. The problem with this well-intended decision is twofold. First, the people impacted by the administrative decisions have little opportunity to provide input and thus experience a top-down approach to leadership. Second, the leaders get overwhelmed with the number of decisions they must make. The average adult makes 35,000 decisions per day (Marples, 2022). Many of these are related to personal care, such as what to wear or eat. But the school leader makes about twice as many educational decisions as a given teacher, or 3,000 per day.

Enter leadership teams. We all want to have influence on the decisions that impact us. In fact, it's more stressful to have others deciding every aspect of our professional life. Although some may argue that this is adding to the workload of teachers and other staff members, the evidence suggests that being part of a leadership team and contributing to the decisions made and actions taken is fortifying and contributes to educator well-being (Steiner et al., 2022).

But the reality is that many leadership teams—and we are not limiting this to the site administrative team—are not contributing to the overall success of the school. Instead, some leadership teams, which can include Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), School Improvement Teams (SITs), and various forms of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), are

- ➔ Perfunctory, meaning that they exist and may even meet but have no decision-making authority
- ➔ Dysfunctional, especially when they do not have systems for working together, and even toxic
- ➔ Negative, as they spend their time admiring problems rather than solving them
- ➔ Stressful, when they do not know how to deal with different perspectives and recognize the strengths of different ideas
- ➔ Anxious, if they do not feel that they belong and they question their confidence as can occur with imposter syndrome

It is the fourth point that is the focus of this book, namely in building effective and efficient leadership teams. As we will discuss in the first module, several teams are needed to ensure that leadership is distributed. In this playbook, we aim to make the case that school leadership is a living, dynamic practice among committed educators as opposed to sequestered leadership in one anointed person. There are decades of research supporting shared leadership, distributed leadership, and collaborative leadership (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2009). Based on an extensive literature review on distributed leadership, New Leaders, a New York–based nonprofit organization that aims to recruit and train school leaders, concludes that the growing body of research, backed by the experience of educators around the country, supports decentralizing leadership in schools. They write, “The role [of principal] has become vastly more complex and demanding” (New Leaders, 2023, p. 3).

As noted in the Gates Foundation (2017) review of distributed leadership, it’s not about dividing tasks and responsibilities among individuals. We are not asking principals and vice principals to decide which of their responsibilities they should give away to others. Instead, distributed leadership allows teams to assume responsibility for several important tasks, such as

- ➔ Supporting the development of high-quality teaching by leading content-specific, grade-level collaborative time
- ➔ Engaging teachers in cycles of observation, feedback, and reflection to adapt and refine their instruction to meet their students’ needs
- ➔ Teaching and modeling how to apply a continuous improvement mindset to teaching, learning, and leading
- ➔ Tracking and monitoring student-level data to ensure schoolwide student progress
- ➔ Providing other relevant job-embedded professional learning supports

PAUSE AND PONDER

Which of these aspects of distributed leadership have you observed or experienced? Which have been challenging in your system?

Each of these functions should allow for the school improvement plans that are developed to actually be implemented, evaluated, and refined. The reality is that most school improvement planning documents are shelved shortly after they are written. Too often school improvement plans are completed as a compliance activity rather than something that impacts the ways in which educators do their work. As Doss et al. (2020) noted, only 62 percent of the teachers surveyed believed that their school improvement plan would make the school better over the next five years, and only 44 percent of the teachers surveyed indicated that the school improvement plan would improve their teaching practices. Figure I.1 includes a list of factors that should be addressed in any effort to improve schools.

I.1 CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

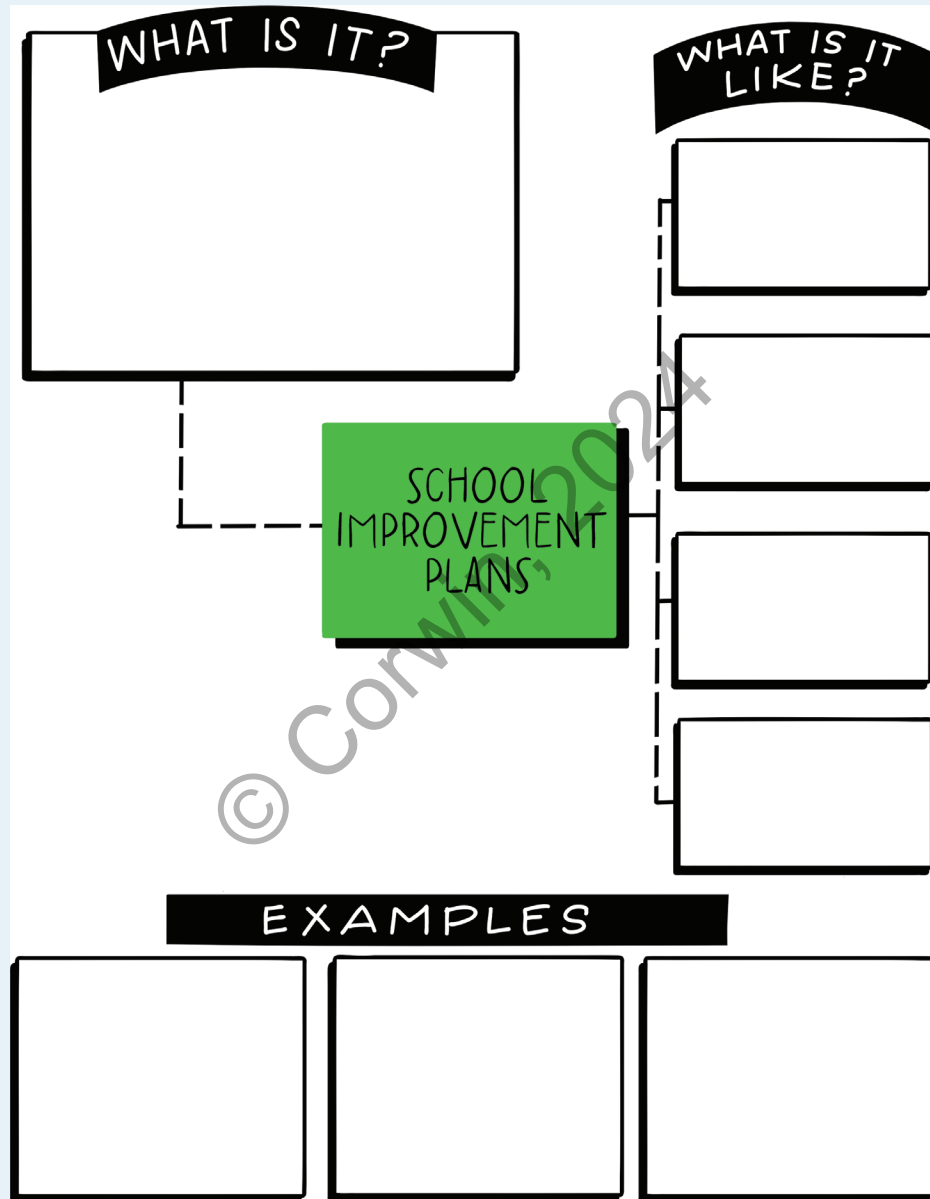
- 1. It must start with data.** To maximize likelihood of success, the improvement process should always begin with probing the data to pinpoint school- and district-based causes of underperformance so that leaders can identify appropriate improvement strategies.
- 2. There is not a single solution or quick fix.** Improving schools involves lots of people and lots of moving parts. Changing just one thing—for example, buying a new curriculum—is unlikely to create lasting improvement.
- 3. Leadership is critical—and we need more strong leaders.** Virtually no schools have improved without talented leadership. But in recent years, states and districts have struggled to find principals who are prepared to lead improvement efforts. Building a strong leader pipeline is key to the success of future improvement efforts.
- 4. It takes time—but there should be measurable progress.** It may take years to see substantial improvement in achievement on state assessments or graduation rates. However, school and district leaders should be able to show gains on leading indicators (e.g., declines in chronic absenteeism, dropout rates, or suspension rates) within the first year.
- 5. It's not just about the bottom 5 percent.** While recent improvement efforts have focused primarily on these schools, most low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners actually attend the other 95 percent of schools—which often demonstrate poor results for these groups.

Source: EdTrust. (2014). *School improvement under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ESSA_FactSheet__Overview_Hyperlink.pdf

Again, it's about leadership. Yet school improvement cannot rest on the shoulders of the formal site leaders alone. It takes a concerted and coordinated effort to ensure that educators continually improve their impact on students' learning. The effort spent to develop the school improvement plan should pale in comparison to the efforts to implement and monitor the plan. And these improvements must become the responsibility of a range of leadership teams who are activated, mobilized, and empowered to take actions.

CONCEPT MAP

Using the term *school improvement plans*, complete the concept map. You can add dimensions and sketches, but consider what it is, what it is like, and some examples.





ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

It is with a sense of urgency that we propose a new conception of leading schools through expanded, empowered, and engaged school leadership teams that will build social capital, leverage professional capital, engage teachers as decision-makers, and provide a healthier school environment for all, including and especially for school leaders. To do anything less is irresponsible and fraught with consequences for schools that will grow over time.

We believe that teachers intrinsically need to be empowered and engaged as valued sources of knowledge and expertise in decision-making and that principals need to collaborate, connect, and share decisions with trusted teams to effectively lead and support stakeholders within the school community.

Toward that end, we summarize research evidence and our experiences, over a combined 80 years of leadership, to recommend processes and procedures for leadership teams. We've organized these as follows:

- ➔ Module 1: Leading Teams Is the Work of Leaders
- ➔ Module 2: Activating Leadership Teams
- ➔ Module 3: Creating Leadership Team Cohesion
- ➔ Module 4: Conveying Collective Leadership Team Credibility
- ➔ Module 5: Leveraging Processes, Protocols, and Tools for Leadership Teams
- ➔ Module 6: Thinking Evaluatively as Leadership Teams

You'll notice several features in each of these modules that are designed to engage you in learning and provide opportunities for you to apply what you are learning. Feel free to doodle in the pages and create sketch notes about important concepts. Each module begins with a concept map that provides an overview of the content. This is followed by the learning intentions and success criteria for the module. Together, these should activate your background knowledge and alert you to the information to come.

Each module includes a Team Challenge with an opportunity to assume the role of one of the members of the team and craft a response. In addition, each module provides several opportunities to pause and ponder the information as well as opportunities to reflect on the content. You'll also be asked to summarize and synthesize your thinking on the page as you create a concept map for other ideas within the module. Finally, we provide a list of actions that foster or derail efforts to create leadership teams at the close of each module.