

SWIFT Center

How Policy Alignment Impacts Sustainability of Schoolwide Transformation: Lessons from SWIFT Knowledge Development Sites

Prepared by

Jennifer Stonemeier (TASH)

Barbara Trader (TASH)

Mary Kingston (Institute for Educational Leadership)

Curtis Richards (Institute for Educational Leadership)

Rolf Blank (Council of Chief State School Officers)

Bill East (National Association of State Directors of Special Education)

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Abstract

The SWIFT Center (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation) Knowledge Development Sites offer diverse examples of best practices for schools and districts interested in schoolwide transformation. These examples can be seen throughout the school environment in both policies and practices. In this SWIFT Issue Brief we discuss examples from several Knowledge Development Sites where policy alignment was included as an active and fundamental strategy for schoolwide transformation. Policy alignment shifts the centralizing force of change from a dynamic leader, who is always time-limited, to an in-grained and lasting cultural framework; and the ownership for the change becomes shared among all staff and community stakeholders, expanding investment in the new culture both now and into the future.

Background

In SWIFT Issue Brief #3 (Stonemeier et al., 2014), we discussed a few examples of policy alignment at Fox Prairie Elementary School, a SWIFT Knowledge Development Site in the Stoughton Area School District in Wisconsin. The Stoughton Area School District actively engaged the whole community in crafting a belief-based mission and vision for the district and a corresponding alignment of their policies and practices. The process allowed the district administration to make dramatic changes in their instructional practices, which resulted in impressive academic and behavioral gains for all students in all grades and subject areas. In this Issue Brief, we explore more examples of policy alignment that have taken place at Fox Prairie and other SWIFT Knowledge Development Sites.

Context

The SWIFT Center is a national technical assistance center committed to building schoolwide inclusive practices that improve the academic and behavioral outcomes for ALL students, including students with disabilities, English learners, and children experiencing poverty. The SWIFT Center learns from ongoing, in-depth research in each of the Knowledge Development Sites. SWIFT is concurrently working in five states to provide intensive technical assistance for

implementing inclusive education through five domains: Administrative Leadership, Multi-Tiered System of Support, Integrated Education Framework, Family and Community Engagement, and Inclusive Policy Structure and Practice. The SWIFT theory of action is that all domains actively influence each other and that all domains are equally critical to achieving outcomes. The relationship of the Inclusive Policy Structure and Practice to the other four domains is illustrated in this Issue Brief.

Administrative Leadership

Within the SWIFT framework, administrators practice “distributed leadership” (National Center on Schoolwide Inclusive School Reform [SWIFT], 2013). This term does not mean that tasks are distributed or delegated among a variety of staff, but rather that responsibilities, contributions, accountability, and influence are shared among employees. Distributed leadership means finding the best solution through idea sharing and participation in decision making by those individuals who are most affected by the decisions. This form of leadership does not mean that everyone makes decisions, but that everyone is able to use their expertise and understanding to contribute ideas and information to inform decisions. Distributed leadership requires trust, cooperation, and a structured approach to collaborative problem solving. Henderson Inclusion School offers an example of distributed leadership through effective use of teaming structures.

Henderson Inclusion School (Boston, Massachusetts)

Henderson Inclusion School, led by Principal Patricia Lampron, has a staff of 54 and a student population of 244, of which 43% meet Federal eligibility standards for free or reduced lunch, 13.5% are English learners, and 30.3% are identified as having a disability.

Ms. Lampron and her staff identified several leadership teams, each with a distinct and direct purpose to inform and improve the practices at the school. According to Ms. Lampron, “Having data is one thing, using it is a very different thing. We had lots of data; we weren’t using it as efficiently as we could.” Thus, a data team gets together to examine a variety of data for both retrospective and proactive purposes. Staff use data to examine the effectiveness of their current instructional practices as well as to determine changes they should make to their instructional practices.

The data team is extremely effective at examining multiple sources of data to inform decisions about individual students’ interventions and outcomes, to understand grade-level impacts, and to examine their own instructional effectiveness. They also utilize data to inform their vertical and horizontal teaming efforts. Vertical teaming refers to groups coming together across the grades

to discuss a specific content area, for example, all math teachers from kindergarten through eighth grade. Horizontal teaming refers to groups coming together in grade-level teams, regardless of content area, such as all fourth grade teachers.

Multi-Tiered System of Support

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is inclusive academic and behavior instruction that provides evidence-based tiered interventions to improve outcomes for all students (SWIFT, 2013). MTSS involves consistent and frequent use of data for decision making as well as flexible grouping of students for instruction and intervention. Fox Prairie Elementary provides an example of policy alignment to facilitate multi-tiered instructional support.

Fox Prairie Elementary School (Stoughton, Wisconsin)

Fox Prairie Elementary School participated in a district-wide alignment process driven by district leadership to ground the district in the values of equity and social justice. The district implemented a MTSS for academic and behavior instruction. The MTSS framework utilized flexible groupings for small group instruction at Tier 1 and Tier 2. To implement this framework, the district administration needed paraprofessionals to support some of the small group instructional teams. However at that time, the State certified paraeducators for either a special or general education role. Meanwhile under the new framework, the school grouped students based on their academic and instructional needs, not on their disability status. Although the challenge stemmed from a state-level policy, the district administration utilized its own policy mechanism to provide a seamless solution. Using money that was available through the district's professional development fund, they paid for the necessary professional development for the paraeducators to receive the additional special education certification. This dual certification allowed the district to access a wider variety of funding streams to support the use of these staff as an integral part of the integrated instructional framework. This strategy had the added benefit of providing a slight pay raise for the paraeducators.

To ensure the viability of this solution, the district administration undertook an extensive stakeholder engagement process. The administration reached out to the paraeducators first, clearly explaining the challenge and the proposed solution. They also proactively engaged with the teachers' union so that all stakeholders were informed and empowered. This policy change also required an act of the independently elected school board, which demanded another level of stakeholder engagement between the district superintendent and the board. By changing policy the district established a lasting practice of dual certification for paraeducators.

Integrated Education Framework

In SWIFT, the term “integrated education” encompasses all students, all employees, and all stakeholders and community members as a part of the educational process (SWIFT, 2013). The idea also means that all systems, services, and practices are considered part of a whole, and as such are organized to prevent duplication, promote coordination, and be efficient as well as effective. A SWIFT school has an organizational structure that discourages the formation of silos and that facilitates collaborative teaching at all grades and all levels of intervention.

Camdenton School District (Camdenton, Missouri)

In 2004, under the administrative leadership of Dr. Kristy Kindwall, Camdenton School District introduced a district-wide school reform effort. The initiative began by gathering all stakeholders to engage in a year long process of articulating their vision, mission, and guiding principles. They consistently examined data in both a prospective and a retrospective manner; they used the data to identify where they needed to start and where they wanted to go. Through these activities, the district made significant changes to their structures, practices, and policies.

A joint change across all schools’ attendance and discipline policies resulted from this district-initiated reform. The school leaders made the decision to change policies after a thorough evaluation of the attendance data. By monitoring the attendance data and cross-referencing that data with the discipline data, they determined that the discipline policy encouraged students to NOT attend school. The initial policy stated that if students were absent, they were not allowed to make up missed assignments and tests. Likewise, if students were out of class for disciplinary reasons they were denied access to the educational setting and materials. The initial district disciplinary procedure mandated In-School Suspension (ISS) as the consequence for certain infractions, whereby students were required to go to school, but were held in a non-classroom setting and explicitly forbidden from reading or working on school work. The district recognized the message that these policies communicated to students and through the reform efforts were able to make significant changes.

First, the district changed the attendance policy to state that if students were absent they were given opportunities to complete any and all missed assignments. Second, the district implemented a district-wide tiered behavior intervention matrix (i.e., MTSS). However, they did not immediately eliminate the ISS and Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) practices until the MTSS practices were fully implemented; in the meantime the district and schools made significant changes to how they managed the ISS and OSS. The district chose to staff the ISS room with a certified teacher to provide instructional support—often in small group settings—to

the students who were expected to complete their academic work while in ISS. Additionally, the district started to provide home-bound instruction for students whose behavioral challenges required longer term suspensions.

The Camden district's actions are an example of how non-academic policy changes can have an important effect on a school's ability to provide an integrated educational framework while still meeting the needs of the staff, the students, and the community.

Family and Community Partnerships

Family engagement in SWIFT schools means that families and school professionals have trusting partnerships and that families have many opportunities to meaningfully engage in their children's education and in the life of the school (SWIFT, 2013). Trusting partnerships are defined as family-professional relationships created through communication, respect, collaboration, commitment, equality, advocacy, and the professionals' cultural responsiveness and competence in achieving outcomes. As in the following Henderson Inclusion School example, a SWIFT school has trusting partnership between families and professionals.

Henderson Inclusion School (Boston, Massachusetts)

Henderson Inclusion School is a traditional public school within Boston Public Schools (BPS). BPS is a national leader in building strong, effective family and community partnerships within schools. The district provides a variety of information and resources for families, including offering health services, connections to other community-based resources, and training targeted to help families support children learning at home. In 31 schools the district has staff who serve as Family and Community Outreach Coordinators with the explicit goals of:

- strengthening relationships among parents and between parents and teachers,
- building the capacity of parents to help their children and to be school leaders, and
- making schools more welcoming to families.

In addition to these investments at the district level, Massachusetts has a statute that requires all schools to establish School Councils to build site-based decision-making groups. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education frames the purpose of these Councils through very specific regulations. At Henderson Inclusion School, Principal Patricia Lampron identified the need to increase parent participation in the School Council. Ms. Lampron proposed an amendment to Henderson's Council bylaws to increase the state mandated proportion of parent membership from equitable distribution to majority parent members. This policy change—expanding the scope of the original intent of the state law—resulted in

quantitative and qualitative changes for Henderson. Ms. Lampron reported this change improved communication between and among all members of the Henderson community. She knew that it meant that she and her staff would have to use data effectively in communicating with and informing the members of the Council. She said that when a school has to make its case with a more diverse group of stakeholders—who may ask challenging questions—the decisions are better and the school is stronger.

When the Council discussed how to align budget priorities with the school’s educational goals, they identified the need for more assistive technology as a top priority. Because the Council was empowered and engaged in the school’s budget process, they were also aware of the budget limitations for purchasing new technology. The parent and community members of the Council organized and successfully implemented a fund raising campaign that paid for new assistive technology for the school. Because the Council provided this budget offset, Ms. Lampron had the flexibility to use budgeted funds in other ways while still supporting best outcomes for Henderson Inclusion School students.

Inclusive Policy Structure and Practice

Inclusive policy structure and practice is demonstrated in process as well as in outcomes. SWIFT recognizes that schoolwide transformation takes time: schools must implement new practices properly and build procedures that sustain those practices (SWIFT, 2013). All stakeholders can use policy as a way to support and sustain good practice in their communities. SWIFT provides opportunities for parents, educators, administrators, community members and others to engage in meaningful processes to identify, align and eliminate barriers to good practice. Building an environment that supports schoolwide transformation requires districts, individual schools, and their surrounding communities to embrace a model of equitable analysis, following a systemic capacity-building framework.

Camdenton School District (Camdenton, Missouri)

SWIFT Issue Brief #3 (Stonemeier et al., 2014) focused on the district-wide alignment that occurred in the Stoughton Area School District including articulating the mission, vision and beliefs of the district; and then methodically aligning practices and policies that ultimately resulted in significant academic and behavioral improvements for all students in the district. Camdenton School District launched a similar strategy with a district-wide examination of its data, practices, and policies. According to Dr. Kindwall, who at the time was the Director of Special Education and Student Services, this process resulted in a complete overhaul of their teaming practices involving groups of educators and paraeducators who come together to create

educational goals and actions to meet those goals. As a result of the district mission, vision and beliefs alignment, the administration and team members decided to re-organize the team structure in a way that more closely tied their work to the mission. Dr. Kindwall reported that “because they [the teams] had their vision to glue them together, they began to look at everything the same way.”

This process began at a time when the district was experiencing a significant increase in the number of improvement initiatives. Teachers said they felt overwhelmed by what they perceived as the fracturing of their work and that initiatives were distracting them from their real responsibilities. Dr. Kindwall and her staff examined the strategies for creating teams and then reframed the teachers’ perceptions of the many initiatives. They helped teachers understand that with collaboration they could embrace these initiatives as complementary and manageable. When the work of the teams became explicitly tied to the district mission, vision and beliefs statements, staff members were better able to see opportunities to blend and braid their work.

When the teams became more focused and empowered in their work, they saw the need to align district goals and the Missouri State Standards (Show-Me Standards). Educators in Camdenton met in vertical and horizontal teams to bring more clarity and specificity to the state standards. These teams created “Super Standards” that were aligned from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Along with these Super Standards, the teams created tools that more clearly and specifically articulated the standards, making it possible to use them to directly influence instructional planning and practices.

Conclusion

The SWIFT Knowledge Development Sites offer fundamental examples of the importance of policy alignment to sustain schoolwide transformation. The examples of policy alignment illustrated in this Issue Brief are specific to each of the sites, but offer valuable lessons for all districts. The Knowledge Development Sites highlighted here consistently utilized policy to support district and schoolwide transformation efforts. Those efforts took time and significant investment of resources—both human and capital—from district and community leaders, but the outcomes are readily apparent. The outcomes also demonstrate that when policy alignment is included as an active and fundamental strategy for schoolwide transformation, the centralizing force of the change shifts from being a dynamic leader, who is always time-limited, to an ingrained and lasting cultural framework. When policy is aligned to support change in a school, the ownership for the change becomes shared among all staff and community stakeholders, expanding investment in the new culture both now and into the future.

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