

The Ohio Improvement Process (OIP): *Toward a Unified State System of Support*

Ohio is committed to the implementation of a unified state system of support directly focused on improving the academic achievement of all students and student groups. The *Ohio Improvement Process (OIP)* is Ohio's strategy for ensuring a systematic and coherent approach for building the capacity of all districts and schools in meaningful and real ways that allow districts to improve instructional practice on a district-wide basis, and make and sustain significant improvement in student performance against grade-level benchmarks aligned with academic content standards for all students across the district.

Inherent in the OIP is the belief that:

- Improvement is everyone's responsibility – at all levels of the district and in all districts, but especially those in corrective action or improvement status;
- Leadership – the purpose of which is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role – is a critical component of the OIP and must be addressed in more meaningful ways to ensure scalability and sustainability of improvement efforts on a district-wide basis;
- State-developed products and tools, including professional development, need to be designed for universal accessibility and applicability to/for every district in the state; and
- A unified state system of support requires the intentional use of a consistent set of tools and protocols by all state-supported regional providers, rather than allowing for multiple approaches across the state, based on preference.

Redefining Leadership to Leverage Improvement. In March 2007, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), in partnership with the Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA), convened a large stakeholder group to identify the essential practices that must be implemented by adults at all levels of the education system for improvement in student performance to be made. This group – the **Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC)** – recommended the creation of a new leadership framework that can be used to distribute key leadership functions, align and focus work across the system, and hold adults at all levels accountable for improving instructional practice and student performance (Elmore, 2006).

Rather than focusing on making improvement through a “school-by-school” approach, Ohio's concept of scale up redefines how people operate by creating a set of expectations that, when consistently applied statewide by all districts and regional providers, will lead to better results for all children. OLAC's recommendations are supported by recent meta-analytical studies on the impact of district and school leadership on student achievement, and provide strong support for the creation of district and school-level/building leadership team structures to clarify shared leadership roles/responsibilities at the district and school level, and validate leadership team structures needed to implement quality planning, implementation, and ongoing monitoring on a system-wide basis.

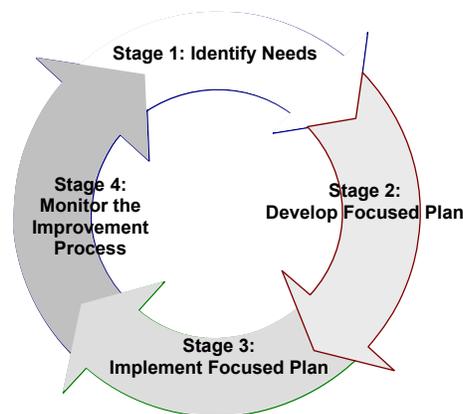
OLAC identified the following six core areas for categorizing the MOST ESSENTIAL leadership practices for superintendents and district and school-level/building leadership teams in six core areas:

1. Data and the decision-making process;
2. Focused goal setting process;
3. Instruction and the learning process;
4. Community engagement process;
5. Resource management process;
6. Board development and governance process (*at the BLT level* – Building Governance Process).

Stages of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP). The Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) involves four-stages (*see Figure 1*) across which processes, structures, tools, and people are connected – all with the intent of helping districts (1) use data to identify areas of greatest need; (2) develop a plan to address those areas of need that is built around a limited number of focused goals and strategies to significantly improve instructional practice and student performance; (3) implement the plan with integrity; and (4) monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the improvement process in changing instructional practice and impacting student performance.

In districts that have been effective in making steady improvement, superintendents work with stakeholders to identify a few “non-negotiable” goals, defined as goals that all staff members must act upon, in at least two areas (i.e., student achievement and classroom instruction), set specific achievement targets for schools and students, and ensure the consistent use of research-based instructional strategies in all classrooms to reach those targets (McREL, 2006).

Figure 1: Stages in the Ohio Improvement Process



This kind of improvement is not random. Rather, it is highly focused, beginning with an honest assessment of student data and the identification of academic weaknesses that must be addressed. **Stage 1** of the OIP begins with this kind of assessment using the **Decision Framework (DF)** tool. The DF is a decision-making process designed to assist districts in making informed decisions – based on what their data tell them -- about where to spend their time, energy, and resources to make significant and substantial improvements in student performance. A state-developed data warehouse allows for relevant data needed to complete the DF process to be readily available to districts and buildings. Such data are organized in such a way as to allow DLTs and BLTs to answer essential questions and make decisions about their greatest need related to improving student performance.

To that end, the DF will help DLTs and BLTs:

- Sort through and categorize data in meaningful ways;
- Prioritize areas of need and make decisions based on an analysis of data;
- Identify root causes of prioritized needs; and
- Develop a more focused plan leading to improved student achievement.

The DF asks essential questions to assist DLTs in identifying and analyzing critical components (e.g., curriculum alignment and accessibility) for improving academic performance of all students, including sub-group populations. The essential questions are organized around the following four levels:

Level I: Student Proficiency

In Level I, DLTs review student proficiency data across three years by grade level, building level/grade span, and disaggregated student groups to identify **up to two** content areas of greatest concern. Further analyses using subscale performance data are completed by the DLT **only** for those content area(s) identified as areas of greatest concern. The remainder of the DF – Levels II, III, and IV – provide essential questions for helping districts conduct a root cause analysis of those factors contributing to the district's current situation. Level II, which has a direct impact on student performance, is completed for **each** area of concern identified under Level I of the DF. Levels III and IV, which have a more global impact, are completed once.

Level II: Instructional Management (*Curriculum, Assessment, & Instructional Practice; Educator Quality; Professional Development*)

In Level II, DLTs answer essential questions in relation to **each** of the content area(s) of greatest concern identified under Level I. Essential questions under Level II focus on curriculum, assessment, instructional practices; educator qualifications, teacher and principal turnover; and the degree to which district professional development (PD) is aligned to problem areas, is designed to promote shared work across the district/buildings, and is effective in helping teachers acquire and apply needed knowledge and skills related to the improvement of instructional practice and student performance. Following the completion of the Level II analyses, DLTs make decisions about the most probable causes contributing to the major problem areas identified under Level I.

Level III: Expectations & Conditions (*Leadership; School Climate; Parent/Family, Student, Community Involvement*)

In Level III, DLTs answer essential questions related to leadership; school climate (including student discipline occurrences, student attendance and mobility, students with multiple risk factors, and teacher and student perception); and parent/family, student, and community involvement and support to identify additional probable causes contributing the areas of greatest need identified in Level I.

Level IV: Resource Management

In Level IV, DLTs answer essential questions related to resource management – defined as the intentional use of time, personnel, data, programmatic, and fiscal resources – to identify additional causes contributing the area(s) of greatest need identified in Level I.

Through the completion of the DF, the DLT prioritizes areas of greatest concern, as well as causes contributing to those areas of concern. The decisions made by the DLT at Stage 1 of the OIP using the DF provide the foundation for creation of a district plan with a limited number (two to three) of focused goals and a limited number (three to five) of focused strategies associated with each goal.

At the school level, Building Leadership Teams (BLTs) complete a similar process at stage 1 of the OIP by using a building-level decision framework to review data and identify a limited number of action steps for improving performance to reach district goals. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) describe the development of strong building leadership teams (BLTs) and the distribution – throughout the team – of some of the 21 practices that characterize the job of an effective principal as key steps in enhancing student achievement. Such practices, identified through McREL’s meta-analysis of 35 years of research on school-level leadership, suggests that leading a building requires a “complex array of skills” not likely to be found in a single individual and support the need for strong leadership team structures. In addition, it has been found (Simmons, J., 2006) that “The better the leadership in school leadership teams, the better the school.”

The Decision Framework assists DLTs and BLTs in selecting the right work (i.e., work that has a high probability of improving student achievement), based on data-based decision making and focused planning, as well as developing the collective know-how to do the right work across the system.

Districts with the greatest degree of need (i.e., selected *high support* districts) also receive an on-site review from the **State Diagnostic Team (SDT)**. The SDT conducts a *District/School Improvement Diagnostic Review*, a process designed to help districts and schools improve student performance by analyzing their current practices against diagnostic indicators – effective research-based practices critical to improving academic achievement for all students. Using the diagnostic indicators, review team members determine the degree to which a school or district demonstrates effective instructional practices.

The focus of this intensive review process is on identifying critical needs (**Stage 1 of the OIP**) of the educational system. Unlike traditional self-assessments, the district/school improvement diagnostic review process relies upon a team of skilled reviewers from outside of the district or school, who is trained on the diagnostic indicators and standardized protocols for data collection and analysis. Regardless of their role, all members of the SDT receive formal training on using the diagnostic indicators, interviewing, observing classrooms, analyzing data, and writing reports. Findings from the review (e.g., data from classroom observation, interviews, and review of documents, diagnostic profiles completed following the review) become additional sources used by districts as they complete the decision framework process and identify critical needs to be addressed.

At **Stage 2** of the OIP, DLTs affirm the priority areas identified through use of the DF in developing a district improvement plan that has a limited number (i.e., two or three) focused goals and strategies. In Ohio, the Consolidated Comprehensive Improvement Plan (CCIP) is the automated state tool for creating district and building improvement plans. All districts in Ohio are required to submit a CCIP, which includes the district goals, strategies, and action steps for improving student performance. The CCIP is a unified grants application that requires district personnel to work together in the development of one coherent plan that aligns and focuses the

work across the district. All school-level plans must adhere to the district plan and school-level strategies and action steps must respond directly to district goals. Schools receiving Title I School Improvement funds must also create their improvement plans in the CCIP.

The CCIP provides the structure, format and means for almost all district/building-level plans submitted to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), and is used by each district to create one coherent improvement plan describing how it intends to:

- Achieve the district vision and mission over the next five years;
- Address requirements and consequences prescribed by state and federal statute [corrective action, restructuring, Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT)];
- Take advantage of flexibility provisions of Title I Schoolwide to combine resources – fiscal, personnel, and time; and
- Draw on funding from multiple state, federal, and local sources to achieve district goals.

To assist DLTs in developing focused plans, ODE has developed a process guide outlining critical steps in affirming priority areas identified at Stage 1 of the OIP, turning these priority areas into focused goals and strategies, and developing progress indicators for monitoring plan implementation. SSTs and ESCs are being trained to assist districts/schools in this stage of the process.

At **Stage 3** of the OIP, the focus is on implementation of the focused plan across the district. Recent research on the effects of full implementation (Leadership and Learning Center, 2007) and its impact on student achievement note that *partial* implementation of evidence-based strategies is not much better than *no* implementation. For example, in one school when fewer than 50 percent of the teachers aligned curriculum, assessment, and instruction to state-content standards in science, the percent of students proficient in that content area on state assessment was 25%. In stark contrast, when over 90% of the teachers in the same school aligned curriculum, assessments, and instruction to the state science standards, student proficiency increased to 85 percent (Reeves, 2006). These findings – based on a synthesis of multiple research sources on teaching, leadership, and organizational effectiveness – highlight the critical importance of full implementation of the district plan based on focused goals that remain stable over time (Reeves, 2008).

The need for implementation of the focused plan *across the district as a system* adds support to the critical role that highly effective district and building leadership teams play in continuously improving system planning and implementation of focused improvement strategies, structures, and processes at the district and school level. When school board members, superintendents, central office staff, principals, and teachers “stay the course” on the right work, as defined by focused goals for instruction and achievement, student learning increases.

McREL (2006), in its study of factors that contribute to effective district-level leadership, suggest a positive correlation between leadership stability and increases in student performance, and a negative correlation between building autonomy (i.e., site-based management in the absence of district leadership) and increases in student achievement. Both findings support the need for effective leadership team structures to perform critical functions and sustain a focus on higher levels of learning for all children across the district.

For example, at the district level, DLTs perform such functions as:

- Setting performance targets aligned with district goals;
- Monitoring performance against the targets;
- Building a foundation for data-driven decision making on a system-wide basis;
- Facilitating the development and use of collaborative structures;
- Brokering or facilitating high quality PD consistent with district goals; and
- Allocating system resources toward instructional improvement.

Similarly, at the school level, BLTs perform such functions as:

- Fostering shared efficacy;
- Building a school culture that expects effective data-driven decision making;
- Establishing priorities for instruction and achievement aligned with district goals;
- Providing opportunities for teachers to learn from each other;
- Monitoring and providing effective feedback on student progress; and
- Making recommendations for the management of resources, including time, and personnel to meet district goals.

At **Stage 4** of the OIP, the focus is on monitoring the implementation of the improvement process at multiple levels (classroom, BLT, DLT, regional, state) and its impact on student achievement. Key indicators are customized for each level, while maintaining the focus on essential practices in the areas mentioned above (e.g., data and the decision-making process, focused goal setting process, instruction and the learning process, etc.).

At the district level, continuous monitoring is necessary to gauge the effectiveness of improvement efforts on student achievement and to ensure a sustained focus on district goals for instruction and achievement, and is the key function of the DLT. At the regional and state level, monitoring the OIP is the primary function of regional managers assigned to oversee the work of state support teams who work with DLTs to review data, develop focused plans, and ensure fidelity of plan implementation and its effect on instruction and achievement.

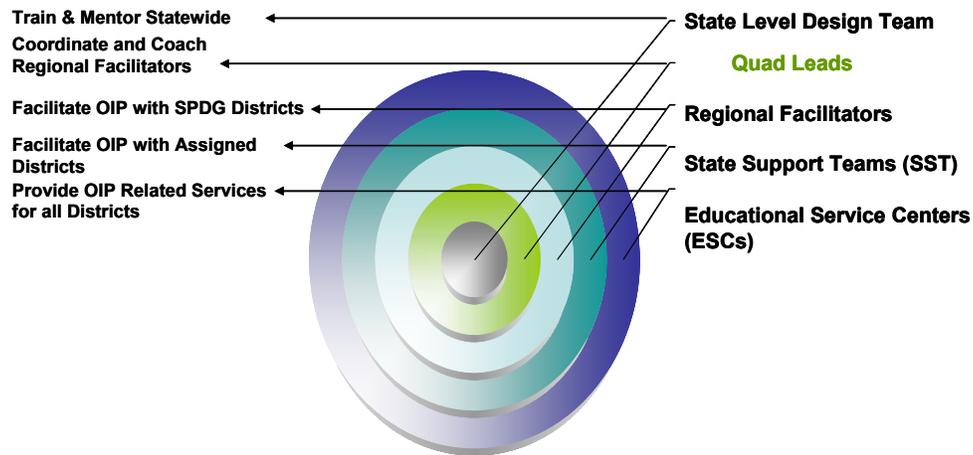
Ohio employs a tiered model to support the continuous development of regional providers to ensure consistency and quality in the services provided to districts needing a high level of support, as well as to those needing a moderate or low level of support. **Figure 2** below illustrates Ohio's training design, and delineates roles of regional providers at each level of the system. At the core, a state-level design team comprised of a representative from each of Ohio's 16 state support team (SST) regions assists the State in developing and deploying training to other regional providers to increase consistency and focus around the OIP. Four members of the state-level design team – referred to as “quad” leads (i.e., four SSTs per each quadrant) – have the additional responsibility of coordinating training and deployment of OIP training on a quadrant basis and serve as an added layer of support for other regional providers across the state.

The quad leads and regional facilitators also support the OIP process with districts participating in Ohio's State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), a USDOE/Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded project designed to support the development of a unified system of education that meets the needs of all students, including those identified as having disabilities under the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). In this way, the SPDG

is providing a vehicle for *moving past* the traditional notion of special education as a separate system or subsystem that should respond to or interact with general education *to* a focus on creating a single unified system that can meaningfully build the capacity of every district to move all children to much higher levels of performance.

Figure 2: Ohio System of Support Training Design

Ohio Improvement Process (OIP)
System of Support: State and Regional Delivery



Regional facilitators support their fellow SST members in their home region to ensure that high priority districts receive a consistent level of quality support using the OIP. Finally, SST staff work with personnel in Ohio’s 59 educational service centers (ESCs) in understanding and using the OIP and its associated tools to support districts *not* in priority status but still interested in making improvement. ESC providers who complete training in the OIP are recognized by the state as part of the regional provider pool eligible to provide services related to the OIP. In this way, the OIP is being used to scale up the intentional use of a consistent set of tools and protocols by all state-supported regional providers, rather than allowing for multiple approaches across the state based on preference and, at the same time, creating incentives for other regional personnel (ESCs) to use the same focused process in working with districts to prevent them from entering a higher risk/support status.

The reliance on data to determine appropriate actions is integral to the success of this model. Additional support for Ohio’s educationally sound approach to system improvement is found in a study of restructuring in Michigan (Scott, C., 2007). In this study, The Center on Education Policy (CEP) found, in general, that multiple reform efforts tailored to the needs of the schools were more likely to result in the schools’ making AYP and exiting restructuring.

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