

Comparing and Contrasting Odds-Beating Schools: Toward a Theory of Action

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Introduction

The theory of action (TOA)¹ described in this brief focuses on three innovations that are central to New York State’s Race-to-the-Top agenda: Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS), a new program for the Annual Professional Performance Review of teachers and administrators (APPR); and Data-Driven Instruction (DDI).

The TOA derives from a recent comparative study of elementary and middle schools in which comparisons were drawn between programs, practices, and policies in odds-beating and typically performing schools. Odds beaters are schools whose students performed better than predicted on the first CCLS-aligned assessments and had also been in good standing based on prior years’ assessments; typical per-

A Theory of Action provides a map for an improvement-oriented journey from “here” (today’s state of affairs and the accompanying results) to “there” (a better state of affairs with improved results).

formers serve similar demographics but consistently get typical performance.

Although elementary and middle schools differ in some fundamental ways, including a greater focus on content area specialty among middle school teachers and subsequent interaction by middle school students with a greater number of teachers, nevertheless, our studies found structural similarities and practices in the odds-

beating elementary and middle schools that distinguish them from more typically performing comparison schools.

Since the three innovations fundamentally are designed to improve schools’ instructional core – teaching and learning – as well as to improve educational equity, this brief draws connections between practices, programs, and policies and stronger-than-predicted performance in the odds-beating schools.

Readiness and Capacity for Change Matter

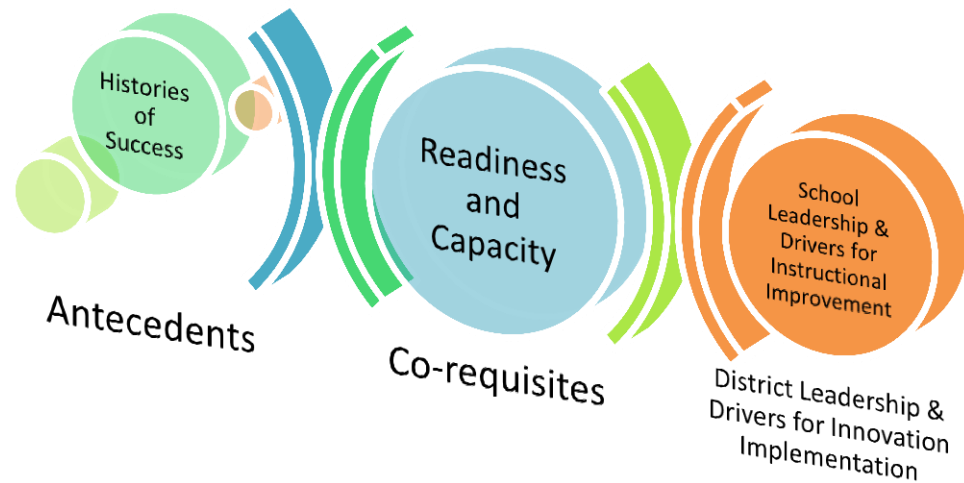
A key question structured the TOA: Do the CCLS, APPR, and DDI result in consequential shifts in what and how teachers teach and what and how students learn? One way to frame this question is in terms of the degree and kind of change a particular innovation poses for schools and districts. First-order changes/disruptions are those that particular districts and schools can implement, absorb, and integrate readily. These schools and districts enjoy organizational readiness and capacity for innovation, starting with innovation-savvy leaders and extending to the resources, social supports, and staff competencies needed to implement innovations at scale.

For schools without such readiness and capacity, changes such as the CCLS, APPR, and DDI represent second or even third order changes – beyond their reach until such capacities have been gained.²

1. Lawson, et al. (2014). Comparing and contrasting odds-beating elementary and middle schools: Toward a Theory of Action. A report for the New York State Education Department as part of the School Improvement Study. University at Albany, State University of New York.

2. Marzano & Waters (2009). *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press; and Weiner (2009). A theory of organizational readiness for change. *Implementation Science*, 4:67, doi:10.1186/1748-5908-4-67.

A Dynamic Theory of Action Framework



It takes capacity to build capacity.³

Prerequisites for Innovation Implementation

The Theory of Action framework in the figure above illustrates that, in addition to current conditions, a school and district's history – where they have been – are critical antecedents that influence their ability to implement disruptive changes in ways that lead to improved teaching, learning, and equity.

Among the antecedents found in the odds-beating schools, but absent or undeveloped in the typical performers are:

- **A stable, committed workforce.** More than 70% of those in the odds beating schools who responded to a survey indicated that they had worked at the school/ district for more than 5 years. Overall turnover rates averaged about 2% lower than the state average.
- **Proactive, adaptive leadership.** District and building leaders use a potent combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies:

(1) Tight on implementation mandates, but loose on performance adaptations in classrooms; and (2) anticipating and providing resources for adult learning, starting with responsive professional development for teachers.

- **Trust and communication.** A pattern of vertical (district leaders–school professionals) and horizontal (principal-teacher, teacher-teacher) communication was found in odds-beating schools, which created a strong sense of reciprocal trust.
- **A well-educated workforce.** Odds-beating schools on average had higher rates of teachers with a graduate-level education beyond the minimum required by the state. Those averages for the typical performers were significantly below state averages.

- **Shared/distributed leadership.** At both district and school levels, leaders of odds beaters share responsibilities, communicate priorities, and involve others in decision making.
- **Ability to allocate resources to priority needs.** In the odds-beating schools, this includes providing relevant, timely, and effective professional development linked to priorities and embedded in practice.

These prerequisites/ antecedents had been present in the odds beaters for some time, but they require continual tending and renewal to stay potent in the present and for future innovations. They are, in short, never-ending priorities with twin benefits:

They are indicators of innovation adoption readiness and capacity, and they also help account for school and district effectiveness in the odds beaters.

3. Hatch, T. (2009). *Managing to change: How schools can survive (and sometimes thrive) in turbulent times*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Improving the Core Technology of Schools

In both elementary and middle schools that are beating the odds, CCLS-aligned curriculum planning and professional development was focused; the emphasis was on developing teachers' competencies in aligning instruction to the CCLS, and it was well underway prior to CCLS implementation.

Teachers' and other front-line professionals' adapted performance as

they revised curricula and modified instructional strategies to support their respective students to meet the CCLS. They were neither expected nor required to attempt this alone but had the social and professional supports provided by peers, instructional coaches, principals, and district office officials, and, in some cases, outside facilitators.

Distributed instructional leadership was more evident

In middle schools than elementary schools, in part because most middle schools have roles such as department chairs and conveners who might also be instructional leaders.

All such leaders are implicated in our theory of action, which describes and explains innovation implementation effectiveness without significant school performance declines.

How Does Your Garden Grow?

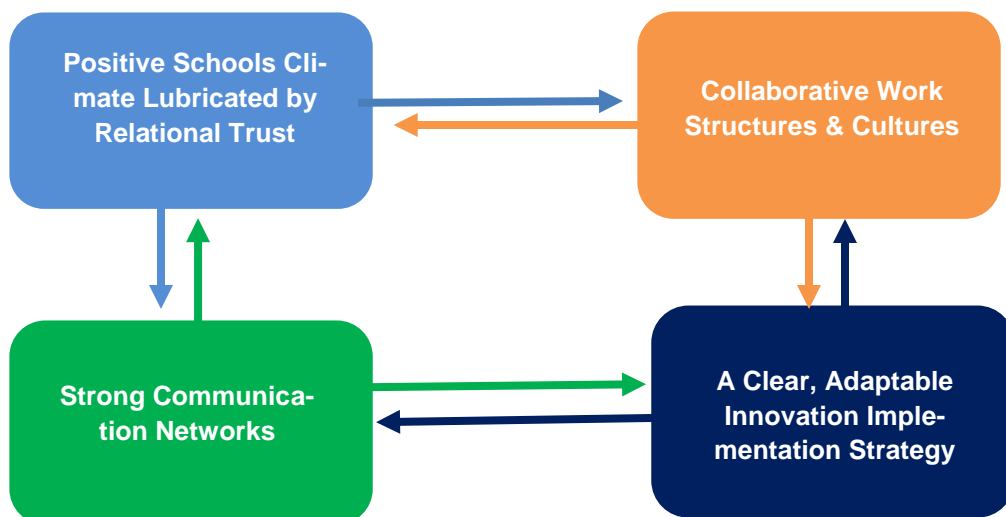


The three policy innovations – CCLS, APPR, and DDI – are transplants to most organizational “gardens.” Those responsible for ensuring that the transplants “take” (i.e., survive and thrive) need to share and distribute responsibility for tending them.

The strategy for doing so has three major components:

1. Include teachers and other front-line professionals in the planning.
2. Give teachers and others reasonable timelines and priorities as well as some autonomy and professional discretion to adapt curriculum and instruction to meet new requirements.
3. Monitor progress by looking for the “sweet spots”; avoid being too loose or too tight.⁴

Like the weather's importance for every garden, school climate matters for effectiveness and innovation implementation. Reciprocal relational trust is key to a positive school climate.



4. Fullan, M. (2006). The future of educational change: System thinkers in action. *Journal of educational change*, 7(3), 113-122.

Considerations for Policy and Practice

The research upon which the Theory of Action is focused on two lines of inquiry: 1) policy implementation and 2) school effectiveness.

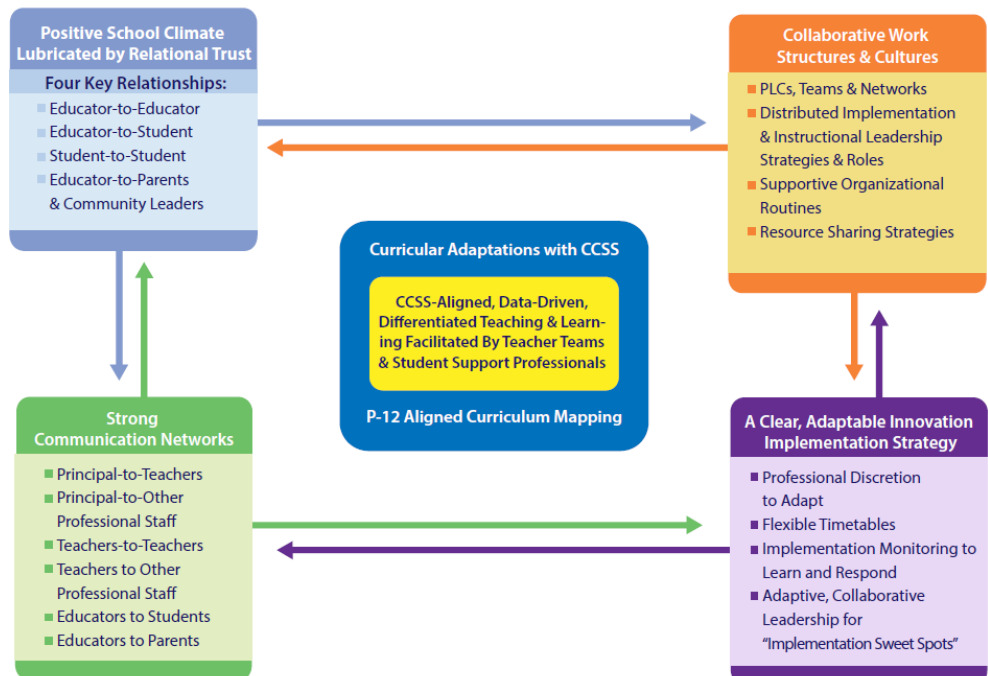
- 1) Findings confirm what had earlier been theorized regarding school and district conditions that affect the ability to implement major policy changes.⁵ That is, it takes capacity to build capacity. Across the elementary and middle schools that were able to implement CCLS, APPR, and DDI without significant performance dips, all had readiness and capacity for change. By definition, they are not typical. A consideration for policymakers, then is:

What policies can be enacted to support typical – even underperforming -- schools to develop the capacity to be able to implement significant innovations designed to improve teaching, learning, and equity?

- 2) The second line of inquiry focused on school effectiveness. Here, the findings suggest that a positive, trusting climate is foundational if front-line educators are to take the risks necessary to fundamentally change curriculum and instruction. Considerations for school and district leaders, then, are:

Providing clear expectations regarding following policy mandates while providing the necessary social and professional supports to make instructional changes – being neither too prescriptive (too tight) about how teachers must teach nor too permissive (too loose) in terms of what they teach.

The figure below illustrates considerations for practice in schools and districts.



5. E. g., Holme, J.J., & Rangel, V.S. (2012). Putting school reform in its place: Social geography, organizational social capital, and school performance. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(2), 257-283. doi: 10.3102/0002831211423316. Weiner, B. J. (2009). A theory of organizational readiness for change. *Implementation Science*, 4:67, doi:10.1186/1748-5908-4-67.

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