

Creating & Implementing a School Improvement Plan

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Introduction

According to Jim Knight's book *Unmistakable Impact*, "almost every school in the United States has a school improvement plan" (Knight, 2011). This begs the question: what is a School Improvement Plan (SIP), and what is its purpose? According to Hanover Research, at its essence a SIP is "a systematic way of planning school improvement and tracking it over time" (p. 5, 2014). Thus it is basically a plan to improve a school (in some way), and to track that progress (however great or small, in the right or wrong direction), to see how successful it was. This paper will explore the SIP implementation and maintenance process, while considering its implications for the author's school, Merit College Preparatory Academy.

Comprehensive Needs Assessment

In order to make a plan to improve, as educators we must first know where we are, and then where we want to go. Otherwise, we risk ending up like Lewis Carroll's poor lost Alice, who, questioning the Cheshire Cat, asked: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where—" said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the Cat" (Carroll, 1865, p. 89).

Obviously, we as educators *do* care where we end up, unlike the befuddled Alice. Yet first, we need to know where we currently stand, as that will inform our plan of action to get wherever it is that we wish to go. A comprehensive needs assessment (CNA) will help us do exactly that. According to many sources (ASCD, 2012; Pipkin, 2015; "The school improvement process", 2018), CNAs are a great place to start when considering the creation & implementation of a SIP. As cited in the 2014 Hanover Research report, the U.S. Department of Education

describes a CNA as “a systematic method for determining needs and examining their nature and causes” (p. 7). This analysis creates a baseline that allows the school and stakeholders to judge how things are in the beginning, throughout, and afterwards, much like “before and after” photos accomplish.

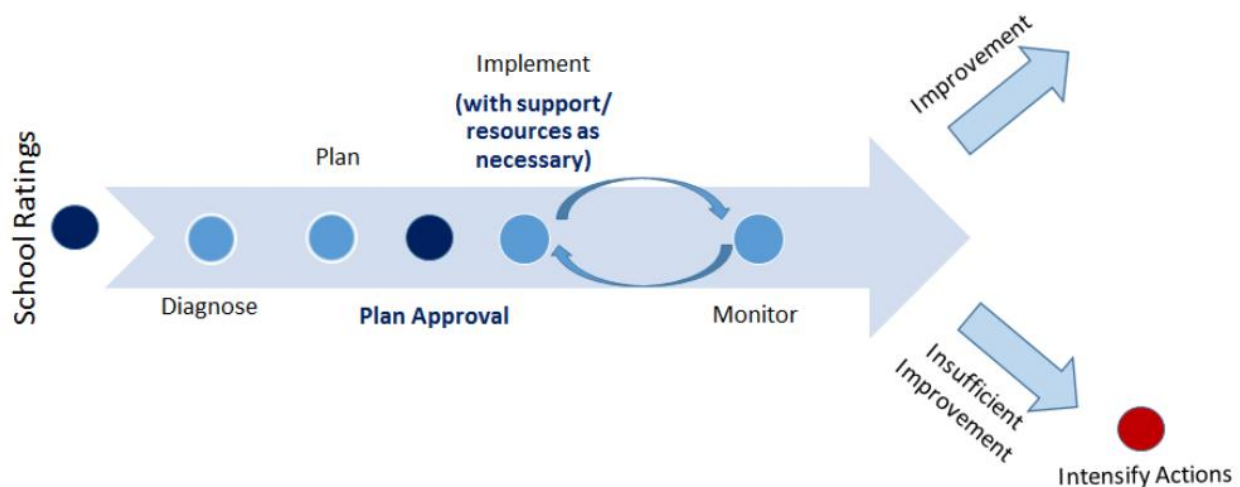
This assessment needs to accurately gauge our school’s strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. Things we might analyze to reveal this information include student achievement data, classroom walkthrough information, and surveys of students, parents, teachers, and administrators (Pipkin, 2015, par. 6). The past two years that I have taught at Merit Academy, I have seen our administration conduct this information gathering process in many ways, from formal evaluations to other informal ways, including consulting parents and students in conferences and so forth.

Some have argued that a more formal, third-party review ought to be required, since many schools “are not as objective as they should be” in this process (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 8). This can end up being costly however; as a charter school we are often limited on funds, so this could be a challenge. Several popular framework models exist to help schools to conduct this comprehensive needs assessment. These include the **Cambridge Education – Comprehensive Needs Assessment Model** and also the popular **Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) – Needs Assessment Tool** (p. 9). The latter is available online (see: sitool.ascd.org) and free of charge; it allows the input of data, and then provides individualized resources depending on that input. Its metrics include looking at such factors such as: School climate / culture; Curriculum and Instruction; Leadership; Family and community engagement, and so forth (p. 10). Certainly this would be a useful and affordable tool for any school to utilize, including ours.

Creating an ISP

After this assessment / diagnostic process, we will see more clearly where the school and its students stand. The next step is to create a SIP based on the needs discovered in the CNA. So who ought to be involved in this process? How should we go about it? What structure ought to guide the process? These are important questions that require a common vision, respect, teamwork, and focus. Below are some keys points to remember as you embark on the creation of a SIP.

Figure 1. The School Improvement Process



Here is one outline for how a school can begin to make and maintain a SIP (Source: edtrust.org, 2018)

Common Vision & Partnership

The faculty (at least the majority of them) need to have the same **overall goal(s)** for the school, otherwise efforts will be exerted in multiple (and sometimes opposing) directions and any improvement effort will likely fail. Thus a common vision is crucial to coalesce and guide the exertions of the staff in creating a school that they can all support and be proud of (Pipkin, 2015, par. 4). We have several different sources guiding our school, particularly our vision

statement: “At Merit we work to *inspire* young men and young women to *develop meaningful skills* and *attitudes* enabling them to *engage* in real world *challenges* and *opportunities*”

(“Mission – Merit Academy”, 2018; emphasis added).

This is our overarching common goal, and while there are arguably myriad ways to achieve this, at least we can all agree on this, which guides our efforts going forward. A crucial part to maintaining cohesion and dedication to this goal is the idea of **partnership**. Jim Knight focuses heavily on how administrators ought to go about creating partnership in their schools, expressed in seven basic principles: equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity (2011, p. 28).

I agree wholeheartedly with each of these. **Equality** between staff and among students, or seeing others “as having equal value” (p. 29) is crucial to developing rapport, trust and community at a school. **Choice** is also important: teachers and students are more engaged at school when they feel they have choices in what they do, even if those choices are within proscribed limits. Jazz music is a great analogy to choice: though it can seem at times chaotic and free-flowing, there are many rules that guide it, such as tempo, key, and so forth. It is *freedom with limits*, and when we create similar environments in our schools, it too can create enduring works and products just as exciting, impressive and enduring as Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington’s 1939 “Take the ‘A’ Train”, for example.

The principle of **voice** is also important, and ties into choice. Freedom to do implies freedom to say, and in that vein, we all ought to respect the opinions of everyone in our schools, giving all a chance to share, contribute, and participate. **Reflection** ties into choice and voice, in that with that freedom, we can reflect, adapt, and move forward better for it. Related to voice and

reflection is the principle of **dialogue**, which is sorely wanting in our day and age, with “everyone [seemingly] intent on talking louder, not wiser.” Instead of shouting down each other, dialogue ought to be “thinking together” (Knight, 2011, p. 38). Dialogue only occurs when we come together in humility, faith, and mutual respect.

Praxis, or the “act of applying new ideas to our own lives” (p. 43) is crucial to making a SIP work. We all have to agree, and act, on the plan of action, otherwise it was indeed all for naught. Students have to believe their learning is meaningful to them, just as teachers need to know that training, improvement plans, and the like are useful and worthwhile. This combines with the last principle of **reciprocity**, or that each interaction at school is “an opportunity for everyone to learn” (p. 44), no matter who is involved. Students need to feel that teachers respect and listen to them. In the same way, teachers need to believe that as they discuss and work with others at the school, that their ideas will be respected and considered, no matter the difference in experience, age, position, or whatever. With these principles of **partnership** in place and respected by all involved, the groundwork has been laid for an effective SIP to be created and followed faithfully.

SIP Design Team

Next, a crack team of educators and stakeholders needs to be formed to take the results of the CNA and to then mold them into a workable, concise SIP or Target. So who ought to be on this team? The Principal (or in our case Director) is an obvious choice, but they ought not to be alone in the process. Research shows, as mentioned in a report by the Public Schools of North Carolina, that “distributed leadership...increase[s] buy-in for the SIP...[and] increases the odds of school improvement being sustainable” (2016, p.12). Pipkin and others echo this sentiment,

suggesting we develop “a process that involves all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community leaders—in establishing a vision, setting goals, and outlining action steps” (2015, par. 18). Each situation is unique, but experts agree that all stakeholders ought to have a say. Research suggests that smaller groups, no larger than 15, are ideal (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 14).

One last suggestion: specific qualities among the participants can be helpful in getting people excited and responsive to the SIP. First, they ought to be **positive**, and have good humor, which will aid the process greatly. This can help when discussions get tense, and help the group remember their purpose. Second, team members need to be **credible**. A parent that is respected in their field, well-spoken, and proactive, for example, will be a much better participant in this process than a stressed single-parent who struggles to attend the meetings. Finally, the members need to be **open-minded**. If not, what needs to occur may be pushed aside by tradition, lack of understanding, or some other trivial reason. If members are flexible however, then the plan itself can be flexible too and able to accommodate a wide range of perspectives and objectives (Knight, 2011, p. 66).

Keeping it Simple

Once you have your CNA and SIP Design Team in place, you’ll be ready to create the SIP. Any such plan ought to include “concise, measurable, and achievable goals and objectives” (School Improvement Network, 2015, p. 2). One thing that I’ve heard Dr. Meeks and Ms. Kuhn mention to us teachers is based on data they’ve collected over the last two years, is that people couldn’t see what makes us unique and different, and a better choice than the local regular public school. Students also suggested that in many classes, they were bored, and didn’t see the

relevance of their learning. While we haven't created a formal SIP, these past two years we have utilized that data as a school to make plans to address these concerns, by refocusing our efforts on **Project / Problem Based Learning**, as well as planning to implement **Expeditionary Learning**, which seeks to solve both of these problems at the same time.

As Merit Academy works to formalize these plans into a SIP, we will continue to build off of the efforts we have made in the past, but perhaps in a more organized, structured manner. This plan ought to be “well-developed, built on relevant data, loaded with evidence-based practices to improve learning, and focused on the school’s critical needs.” I know that we have three main goals right now (as our admins discuss the creation of our SIP), and that is good, because we need our efforts to remained concise and focused. Additionally, these goals must be easy to evaluate and measure, to see how well implementation is going, and to make course-corrections as needed (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2016, p. 12).

Figure 2. Local SIP Goal Example

School Name: Mapleton Elementary

School Year: 2018-2019

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|--|
| <p>Goal: Mapleton Elementary will continue to purchase technology and software that will increase instructional improvements within the classroom that support student learning and 21st century skills. Increased technology will occur on each grade level according to need.</p> |
| <p>Nebo Goal (Board Goal) Connection: Technology</p> |
| <p>Action Plan(s):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Technology may be <u>purchased</u> to support and enhance classroom instruction with a goal of one to one Chromebooks in grades 3-6 and 6-8 iPads in grades K-2. 2. Outdated technology will be replaced. 3. Equipment and supplies will be <u>purchased</u> to maintain current technology (i.e. projector bulbs, mice, headsets, etc.) |
| <p>Measurements of Success:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers and students will be observed utilizing technology in the classroom in multiple subject areas and in a variety of ways. 2. Students in grades 3-5 will participate in district keyboarding programs. |
| <p>Supporting Professional Development Activities (if applicable):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers and students will be observed utilizing technology in the classroom in multiple subject areas and in a variety of ways. 2. Students in grade 3-5 will participate in district keyboarding programs. |

Here is a good example of a simple, concise SIP goal for a nearby local school (Source: Mapleton Elementary School, 2018)

Maintaining the SIP

Perhaps the hardest part of all is maintaining the SIP once you've put it all together. Even though Merit Academy hasn't had a formal SIP, we have had goals and objectives over the past two years that we have been seeking to implement. We've had numerous Professional Developments (PD) to that end, as well as follow up by department heads and administrators, all in an effort to measure our fulfillment of these goals, see where we've had successes and struggles, and made plans to improve going forward.

Successful SIPs make sure they have frequent monitoring mechanisms in place, to measure the progress made towards completion of those goals. I would quickly add three final suggestions (as mentioned by Jim Knight) in order to keep our SIP alive and well: Instructional Coaching, Impactful Workshops, and Intensive Learning Teams. Teachers such as myself struggle sometimes to take the big ideas from SIP goals and then implement them faithfully in their own classes. It is stressful to feel that the main time we get feedback on these efforts is through official evaluations (at least in my experience). This is where an instructional coach would be helpful.

Instructional Coaching

I understand that having a full-time instructional coach may not be fiscally feasible, but I have a possible solution: Perhaps once a month or term, each teacher could team up with another teacher, and they could visit each other's classes during their own prep period, and act as instructional coaches to each other. This would be with the understanding that their suggestions and ideas are non-evaluative in nature, but simply an effort to learn and help learn. This would

help foster a better rapport among teachers, and also give us a unique perspective on our teaching, and ways that we can both improve our teaching and better fulfill the goals of the SIP.

Impactful PD / Workshops

As a teacher, I have thoroughly enjoyed some of our PD / Workshops that we have engaged in at our school. There have also been some that I have wondered “This doesn’t seem to apply to me; what am I doing here?” One idea that I have for this: provide options for teachers, so that we can focus on what we feel would help us most. We’ve broken up before into various groups during PD, but besides short activities, I don’t remember any PD that let me meet up with fellow teachers to work and discuss a topic that I was truly interested in, which I felt would be most useful to me. If we were to implement a PD utilizing a jigsaw-protocol style with various classes, where we might go and learn what we want to, I think this would be very helpful. It would make the PDs more engaging, and ties in with the principle of choice (within bounds), that we and our students so highly value.

Intensive Learning Teams

In Jim Knight’s book, he mentions this idea, but it is based more around the public school district, and those teachers who teach the same class across different schools (2011, p. 177). We at Merit Academy don’t quite fit that model, but I believe the idea of Intensive Learning Teams (ILTs) has been modified and implemented already at our school via our department meetings. At least in our department, I have felt like our meetings have had an ILT-esque quality to them, allowing us to meet and collaborate in smaller, sociable groups and discuss some of our difficulties, as well as collectively look for solutions in our teaching. I personally have appreciated this, and feel that we’re doing a great job in this area, and I hope we see it continue.

Conclusion

Throughout this summer, I've been in close contact with our administrators, and they are currently engaged in the process of creating our own formalized SIP. This paper in part hopes to help guide that process. From what I've seen and witnessed (as previously mentioned), our school is already partially fulfilling many of these suggestions and ideas, but just requires a bit more structure and follow-through. We have (for the most part) a common vision for the school that we buy into, and lots of community support as well. We have been carrying our CNAs in various ways, and these have already helped us identify strengths and weaknesses we should address.

Currently, our school is working on creating a formal SIP, involving our administration, school board, and teachers and I know the people involved are dedicated and want to see its success. We have already been laying down much of the foundational groundwork for a SIP in the last two years that I've been at Merit Academy and since Dr. Meeks came in as administrator, and that will continue. I am confident that we will continue in a positive direction regarding this, and I am hopeful that in some way this paper and research will aid that process.

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