



Understanding the Keys to Continuous School Improvement – Part 1

A White Paper

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The concept and moniker of school improvement has been widely utilized over the last decade within the educational community. Almost everything that educators do in some way revolve around school improvement, from test scores, report cards and lesson plans, to professional learning, safety procedures and discipline reports. Because it is often associated with most things in education it can become a nebulous concept that lacks true focus or understanding. However, based on the research in *What Works in Schools* (2003) and *School Leadership that Works*, (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2003), along with the Standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (AdvancED, 2007), the Georgia Department of Education developed a comprehensive document to explain, guide and implement effective school improvement throughout Georgia schools entitled *School Keys - Unlocking Excellence through the Georgia School Standards* (2008). The purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) to explain and summarize the first four strands or “keys” for school improvement and discuss how each strand is critical for success; and, 2) to demonstrate how the use of Elements™ can impact each strand directly or indirectly to bring about an even greater rate of success for school districts.

The School Keys are intended to serve as a descriptor of effective, high impact practices for schools throughout Georgia to describe what schools need to know, understand and be able



to do, in similar fashion to the Georgia Performance Standards curriculum for students, (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). The School Keys underwent extensive development, a pilot study, revisions, and external validation before being implemented throughout Georgia schools. Ultimately, after synthesizing and combining the existing research of Marzano and with the SACS standards, eight broad strands were determined to encompass the research. These include: Curriculum; Instruction; Assessment; Planning and Organization; Student, Family, and Community Support; Professional Learning; Leadership; and School Culture (Georgia Department of Education, 2008).

The first strand is curriculum, which is defined as “a system for managing and facilitating student achievement and learning based upon consensus-driven content and performance standards” (Georgia Department of Education, 2008, p. 5). This strand includes three standards focused on curriculum organization and sequencing, teacher collaboration for effective implementation, and a process for monitoring and evaluating curriculum implementation. Marzano (2003) states how a guaranteed and viable curriculum has the greatest impact on student achievement. Thus, teacher knowledge and understanding of what students should know, understand and be able to do is paramount to school improvement.

Assessment is the second Key and is defined as “the collecting and analyzing of student performance data to identify patterns of achievement and underachievement in order to design and implement appropriate instructional interventions” (Georgia Department of Education, 2008, p. 11). Standards include ensuring that all personnel use data to design instruction, a balanced assessment approach is utilized, and evaluation data is used to plan for



every student. If one expects high achievement and improvement, one must inspect student performance in multiple ways and at multiple times.

The next key is instruction. Instruction is defined as “designing and implementing teaching-learning-assessment tasks and activities to ensure that all students achieve proficiency relative to the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS)” (Georgia Department of Education, 2008, p. 19). Components within this strand describe how instructional design and implementation are clearly aligned with the curriculum, research-based instructional techniques are utilized and high expectations are evident with students playing an active role. Davenport and Anderson (2002) state that, “Instruction must be customized to meet each child’s unique needs and abilities” (p. 26). In their book *Classroom Instruction that Works*, Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001) identify the nine effective teaching strategies that have the largest effect on student learning. When used uniquely in a variety of ways, combined with high expectations and student engagement, growth in student achievement can be greatly enhanced and accelerated.

The fourth key relates to planning and organization and is defined as “the processes, procedures, structures, and products that focus the operations of a school on ensuring attainment of standards and high levels of learning for all students” (Georgia Department of Education, 2008, p. 29). Encompassing standards include a shared vision and mission, a current school improvement plan, collaborative fiscal management, and consistent practices and procedures for all staff. Though many facets exist within this area, it is a necessary and undeniable process of schooling and one that must seek to be efficient and effective. As



Wagner (2008) states, “It's time to hold ourselves and all of our students to a new and higher standard of rigor, defined according to 21st-century criteria. It's time for our profession to advocate for accountability systems that will enable us to teach and test the skills that matter most” (p. 25).

Elements™ is not a silver bullet to solve every educational dilemma or problem facing U.S. schools. However, it is a comprehensive resource to help empower educators to make more efficient and effective decisions for themselves and the students whom they support. Within the Key of curriculum, all standards and curriculum can be organized and sequenced using the pacing guide and blueprint features of the curriculum plan. Having a process of sharing and collaboration amongst educators can enhance and refine this process and bring about buy-in and a greater level. Additionally, with the Assessment component the curriculum plan can be evaluated and monitored in multiple ways to identify strengths and weaknesses.

The assessment strand of the Georgia Keys is addressed under the Assessment component within Elements™ and is a critical component of ongoing school improvement. Teaching and learning must be evaluated to determine what is working and what is not. Once determined, ideas can be formulated at all levels, including student, teacher, school and district, which will address areas of need and validate areas of strength. With state, district and class level assessment options, Elements™ provides educators with multiple test avenues. Another critical aspect of assessment is balance; therefore, use the tool for multiple choice, true/false, short answer or essay. Utilize rubrics as well to score culminating activities educators create to measure a wide range of knowledge and skills. Whether creating your own



items, using the supplemental item bank or using an external test, the Assessment component can enable everyone to not only give assessments, but an opportunity to analyze data at all levels with the most powerful reporting tool available. With multiple data reports, one can then begin to ask the right questions and plan for the next key.

The next key to continuous school improvement is Instruction. Once the curriculum is aligned, one can utilize the District, Teacher, Student or RTI planning components to align instruction. Instructional plans at all levels can be custom-designed to include local preferences, best-practices, and all the necessary fields for documentation. However, one can take this process to a higher level with reporting capabilities built into the instructional process as well, thus providing analysis on multiple data fields.

Lastly, by utilizing the various aspects of Elements™ one can bring about effective planning and organization that produces consistent practices and procedures. While a school's vision must be developed by its stakeholders, Elements™ can help document the vision and ensure is sharing. Additionally, as schools develop improvement plans, these can be designed, housed and shared through the product. In the end, the web-based capability of Elements™ allows all stakeholders the ability to share, contribute and understand the essential ingredients for school success.

References

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