

Issues . . . *about Change*

Year One and Year Two: What Do You Do In Comprehensive School Improvement?

Introduction

During the summer of 1998, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) began a partnership project entitled Facilitating Implementation of Reform Strategies and Tactics (FIRST). A two-year initiative, FIRST partnered staff from SEDL's Strategies for Increasing School Success (SISS) program with staff at five schools—one in each of the five states defining SEDL's service region—Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. These initiatives would differ from former models of school improvement. FIRST partnerships would be long-term, broad scale, in-depth, "joined at the hip" partnerships focusing on the identified needs of the schools and including all relevant staff. Identified needs were not limited to a particular program or organizational aspect of the school, but could encompass curriculum, instruction, assessment, classroom management, professional development, parental and community involvement, school management, and a consideration of how these parts functioned as a whole to create a particular school culture.

For two years, SEDL staff provided information, guidance, and technical support for improvement efforts determined by the school personnel. FIRST schools collaborated with SEDL in conducting interviews, surveys, and observations about the course these improvement efforts took, including major accomplishments and stumbling blocks. The

entire school program was examined and prioritized; specific academic areas and/or organizational structures were chosen as the focus of improvement work at each of the FIRST schools. The intent of the FIRST project was to develop the capacity of school personnel to plan, monitor, and continue improvement efforts. To that end, technical assistance providers were enlisted and coordinated with SEDL staff's work to assist the schools during the FIRST initiative.

FIRST schools represented the region's diversity on many levels; three high schools (Banner, Community, and Pelican), one middle school (Tall Pines), and one K-8 school (San Fernando) were chosen. These schools, whose names are pseudonyms, served students across a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and struggled with issues both specific to their schools and common to many schools (e.g. low student achievement, lack of parent involvement).

In the course of the research into school improvement strategies and particularly through the first year of experience in partner schools, SEDL staff identified and confirmed the primacy of five core issues for school improvement efforts. The staff's analysis of school issues and strategies for advancing school improvement was framed within these areas: focus of the improvement work, organizational structures that support school change, personal and social dynamics of the individuals and organizations involved, the

widening circles of contexts that influence school work, and leadership that can influence all of the preceding.

Much of the first year of SEDL staff's work was devoted to becoming familiar with the school culture and context, and building relationships with school personnel. First year efforts tended to identify the issues that impeded school improvement. As these issues had often been hidden by routine and low expectations prior to the partnership, many participants became discouraged as improvement efforts caused these issues to emerge or re-emerge.

Major tasks facing the SEDL staff in the second year thus included maintaining momentum in ongoing change efforts, continuing relationship-building, and celebrating accomplishments as they occurred. SEDL partners had built trust with school staff in their roles as external change facilitators—neutral parties in district, school, and interpersonal politics. In order to advance change efforts and maintain this trust, SEDL personnel focused their efforts on each school's identified needs, with particular attention to the five core school change issues.

Focus of the Improvement Work

Year 1. In order for partner schools to fully engage in the work of school improvement, the focus of the improvement work that was undertaken was identified and chosen with the full participation of staff at each school. The level and root of difficulty in achieving this objective varied from school to school. For example, Banner High School was reconstituted during the first year of its partnership with SEDL. In its effort to provide students with a sense of community and to encourage personal relationships between students and teachers, this single large high school was divided into four

academies. The focus of improvement work quickly became apparent: implementation of the academies concepts and structures.

At San Fernando School, SEDL assisted staff in reviewing achievement data and performing action research. As a result of their learning, staff at San Fernando decided to focus improvement work on student retention of skills, and on curriculum, particularly in mathematics.

The SEDL facilitator at Community High School conducted student focus groups for faculty observation, supported professional development for faculty and administrators, and assisted in the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources in the community and from students. Freshman student success was chosen as the focus of improvement work, and the rest of the first year at Community High was spent identifying leverage points and making plans for implementation in the second year.

At Pelican High School, issues of communication between the central office and the school inserted themselves into efforts to define the focus of improvement work. These issues were worked on as the facilitator introduced the study of student achievement data and its analysis, followed by defining a vision focused on student outcomes. While staff and administrators quickly agreed to focus efforts on improving instructional effectiveness, the consensus broke down when the SEDL facilitator pushed for more specifics. The staff ultimately decided to focus on “planning” as a way of addressing instructional effectiveness.

Student achievement and other forms of data were collected by SEDL staff and utilized to inform staff at Tall Pines Middle School about the academic needs of students and the factors operating within the school that impacted student learning. SEDL facilitated development of a shared vision of exemplary

schools through the distribution of research-based studies on successful middle school reform. With this support and guidance, Tall Pines staff identified four areas for improvement: literacy achievement, mathematics achievement; student attendance; and student health, wellness, and safety.

Year 2. In Year 2, SEDL staff sought to ensure that students remained a visible and vital target of school improvement efforts. At Tall Pines, an administrator from a neighboring school district, trained by staff from SEDL’s Program for Teaching and Learning (PITL), developed and delivered professional development for teachers that focused on what students learned—not what teachers taught. As part of their year-long staff development in mathematics instruction, teachers at San Fernando were trained in conducting student interviews, in order to gain insight into the process and success of student learning. To discover and disseminate student priorities and perceptions, SEDL staff conducted student focus groups at San Fernando School, Community High, and Pelican High. At Pelican High School, development of a school improvement plan began as SEDL engaged Pelican staff in a return to the school’s mission and vision, and led the staff in reflecting on the skills and attributes of an ideal Pelican High graduate.

These efforts to keep school improvement work focused on students helped to diminish political issues and increase staff enthusiasm and commitment. At Pelican High School, for example, staff who had been adept at blaming external circumstance—district policy, student socio-economic background—for students’ lack of success began to see and take responsibility for their impact on students. Staff became both more accountable and more enthusiastic as they planned, implemented, assessed, and revised specific strategies for improved student achievement.

SEDL made available the resources of both its SISS and PITL programs, creating and delivering professional development activities specific to each schools’ needs; conducting, analyzing, reporting and guiding revision in response to the assessment of school improvement strategies that were initiated; leading, planning, and attending meetings of school and/or district staff; and providing each school an observer and ally both removed from divisive school issues and fully committed to school improvement and increased student achievement. In addition, SEDL staff brought in outside experts and assisted schools in accessing local resources, and developing relationships between school and district staff, and between the FIRST school and education professionals at neighboring schools and universities.

Reflection. Lack of access to and understanding of student achievement data played a large role in the difficulties encountered as each partner school sought to define and maintain the focus of their improvement efforts. SEDL spent time at each school gathering existing data, collecting new data, and training school staff in interpreting data and identifying logical, research-tested strategies for school improvement.

In the absence of empirical information about their students’ achievement, school staff had developed their own rationale for student achievement and lack of achievement. SEDL staff had to address these “straw men,” including: student socioeconomic background; government-mandated programs, standards, and measurements; interpersonal disputes; and other factors outside staff control. SEDL partners pushed school staff to assume responsibility for student learning, and to believe in their ability to positively affect that learning.

Organizational Structures

Year 1. During Year 1, SEDL staff familiarized themselves with the organizational structures that existed at partner schools, and assisted in the development of organizational structures where there were none. The reconstitution of Banner High School into academies required that new communication structures be developed and implemented. Pelican High School, which had recently been created by the division of a K-12 school into an elementary, middle, and high school, had a similar need to develop new organizational structures, particularly addressing communication between central office staff and the school.

At Community High and San Fernando School, organizational structures that were already in place were strengthened and supported through the FIRST partnership. At Community High, the principal provided meals and, in some cases, stipends, in support of after-school planning meetings among teachers; this was to change in year two. Facilitation of meetings at San Fernando School helped to assure that all staff were included in planning, and all voices were heard at staff meetings. At San Fernando, SEDL also assisted in the creation and operation of action research teams, which collected and presented the data utilized in developing that schools focus of improvement work.

Organizational structures at Tall Pines provided little support for change. Systems for routine procedures, such as tracking attendance and communicating hallway duties, were lacking. Communication among teachers and between the school administration and teachers was sporadic and ineffective. Structures such as grade level teams and the school's steering committee, while in place, were not utilized effectively. Grade level teams collaborated on student discipline, parent/teacher conferences, and planning for special events. The school's steering committee existed primarily to

communicate the principal's unilaterally developed agenda to the rest of the staff. Expectations and opportunities for teacher leadership or problem-solving were nearly non-existent.

Year 2. During the FIRST initiative's second year, organizational structures remained a focus of attention at partner schools. SEDL facilitators sought to enhance structures and practices that worked and mitigate the effects of structures that did not exist or work well. When funds to provide meals and stipends for professional development dried up at Community High School, SEDL supported the principal in utilizing other school resources to support improvement efforts. Communication via e-mail helped fill the gap created by fewer meetings; the school's video equipment (and students) provided a means to create videotapes of training activities.

At Pelican High School, in light of a new school structure, and with the cooperation of a new administrator, SEDL staff supported school personnel in adapting necessary procedures to the new organization and structures. At Banner High School, FIRST efforts targeted one academy of the four (that understood the value of FIRST and articulated interest) created by the division of a large high school.

The lack of organizational structure at Tall Pines Middle School remained a significant obstacle to school improvement efforts. The SEDL facilitator at Tall Pines advocated for fuller use of existing organizational structures, and helped the principal realize the strength and skills of the campus leadership team. In addition, the facilitator created opportunities from external mandated policies; the district required the completion of a campus plan—a difficult task given the lack of organization and staff expertise that characterized Tall Pines. The SEDL coordinator volunteered to assist in this effort, and in the process modeled

inclusion, data driven decisions, planning, and communication—and embedded greater capacity for ongoing school improvement into Tall Pine’s future.

District requirements provided accountability and legitimacy to school efforts at San Fernando School. Here, the SEDL facilitator utilized district pressure to align curriculum within the school, and with state assessments helped to unify teachers—by quelling resistance—in taking the “next steps” in the school’s focus on improved mathematics instruction and achievement.

Reflection. As a result of two years’ work in partner schools, SEDL staff learned that they had been too optimistic in terms of organizational structures at partner schools. Partner schools functioned with minimal organization, allowing informal networks and unspoken expectations to guide and define their work, and reinforcing the isolation of teachers in their individual classrooms. Without clear access to information, the means to express opinions, or the assurance that their perspective would be honored, teachers and staff retreated from one another, convinced themselves that school-wide improvement was impossible, and focused their efforts narrowly.

SEDL facilitators found themselves working within organizational structures that were cumbersome and ineffective, or creating new organizational structures with personnel who were often skeptical and occasionally resistant. Facilitators found this work to be critical to maintaining improvement efforts, but also to be quite difficult, thankless, and slow to show benefits.

Personal and Social Dynamics of Individuals and Organizations

Year 1. SEDL facilitators observed the personal and social dynamics that impacted

improvement efforts at each school, advanced dynamics that supported those efforts, and—most critically—avoided being drawn into or aligned with any one side of personal and social conflicts involving the partner schools.

At Banner and Community High Schools, personal and social dynamics were generally positive. Banner High School was marked by strong, clear, and widespread teacher commitment to and knowledge of students. For the most part, this commitment fueled supportive professional relationships between teachers, although there was little opportunity for teachers’ suggestions to be incorporated into administrative decisions about the new academy structure. At Community High School, trust in the principal translated into the ability for teachers to work well with one another, and to ignore small factions that arose in opposition to improvement efforts.

In schools where the personal and social dynamics were less positive, SEDL facilitators sought to engage all staff in the improvement efforts—and in the meetings and decision-making that informed and shaped those efforts. Nudging teachers to learn one another’s names by asking a group who is missing provided a small but vital foundation for teachers to begin talking to one another about instruction at Pelican High School. At San Fernando, providing the opportunity for staff to discuss the issues that simmered between them allowed some of these issues to be resolved. At Tall Pines, attending to organizational structures helped to dispel some of the tensions that precluded the development of strong personal relationships among teachers and staff.

Year 2. For the most part, issues of personal and social dynamics were addressed only tangentially during the second year. SEDL staff maintained their focus on building relationships among teachers and between

teachers and administrators in the context of professional development and school improvement efforts. When facilitating meetings, SEDL staff worked to ensure that every voice was heard, and maintained professional neutrality when tensions emerged. SEDL staff utilized emerging teacher leaders and other individuals invested in school change efforts to encourage schoolwide commitment to the project. In this project and in others, SEDL has learned that professional growth, focused efforts toward school improvement, and the academic success of students form the strongest bonds between school professionals.

Banner High School and Tall Pines Middle School did provide notable exceptions, where personal and social dynamics jeopardized improvement efforts. At Banner, three of the four academy principals began to isolate and undermine the fourth principal, and to reduce their commitment to the FIRST project. These three principals ultimately left the FIRST project, and the SEDL facilitator worked exclusively with that fourth principal, in the academy she administered.

Issues related to leadership negatively impacted personal and social dynamics at Tall Pines Middle School. A school climate survey was conducted during each year of the FIRST project—all indicators fell in the second year, and the subscale of “Collegial support” fell most dramatically. Unfortunately, SEDL could do little to directly address these issues until issues of leadership improved.

Reflection. Personal and social dynamics is perhaps the least distinctly bounded of the five critical areas the FIRST project identified and addressed. Problems that are rooted in leadership, context, and organizational structures almost always affect personal and social dynamics negatively. Similarly, advancement in any of the four other areas tends to support positive dynamics. But, while

SEDL facilitators acknowledged that personal and social dynamics tended to bleed into and out of the other critical areas, they found it remained an important area to consider independently.

When school personnel know and trust one another, the work of school change gets easier. Communicating expectations of respect and participation, bringing parties in conflict together to dialogue, and teaching techniques for assuring full participation and equal representation helped to advance positive personal and social dynamics, which in turn advanced school improvement efforts.

Contextual Influences

Year 1. Each of the five partner schools operated within a different community and district context. At Community and Banner High Schools, contextual issues were minimal, and easily addressed through assuring clear communication between all stakeholders. This was a central tenet of the focus of improvement efforts, although some attention was required at Banner because of the school’s reaction to the community and city politics that were at play.

Contextual issues were most significant at Tall Pines, where new state and district policies and mandated curricular changes created new roles, relationships, and responsibilities among administrators, teachers, parents, and students. In addition, Tall Pines operated under a long-standing desegregation order that required careful scrutiny of any changes that might affect the racial composition of the school. A strong teachers union actively monitored the effect of these changes and FIRST improvement efforts on teachers’ work and responsibilities. At Tall Pines, SEDL sought to connect all these factors to develop a coherent improvement effort.

Similarly, tensions between the district and school at Pelican High School were addressed in the first year by providing opportunities for representatives of each organization to meet, dialogue, and problem-solve. The establishment of regular meetings had a powerful and immediate impact on communication and trust between school and district personnel.

The students at San Fernando School provided this school its most challenging contextual issue. While most of the core staff at San Fernando were Euro-American, the majority of instructional assistants and students were Native American and Hispanic. SEDL staff worked to assure that the voices of instructional assistants were included and honored at staff meetings, and brought in research-based materials on connecting school curricula to students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Year 2. SEDL facilitators continued to assist school personnel in identifying and responding to a variety of contextual influences. Perhaps more critically, SEDL facilitators sought to maintain school focus on improvement goals and specific activities toward those goals, in order to prevent contextual influences from becoming excuses for stasis. SEDL helped school personnel learn to define their real spheres of influence and to "handle" issues of context. They also provided technical support in the completion of campus improvement plans, offered advice on utilization of Title I funds, and guided professional development in areas of multiculturalism and age-appropriate teaching strategies.

Reflection. While schools are the location of improvement work, they are critically affected for better or worse by the context in which they exist. External change facilitators must have a wide and deep range of strategies and information in order to be ready to anticipate

and address issues of context during improvement efforts. Bringing all parties to the table, where possible, is the best first strategy in addressing contextual issues. In all cases, more and better communication, and more and better understanding mitigated the negative aspects of context, and allowed stakeholders to begin to imagine context as a strength of, and not a hindrance to, their school.

Leadership

Year 1. Gathering an accurate impression of each partner school was the first step for SEDL facilitators across each of the five critical areas for school improvement. Doing so quickly was particularly important in the area of leadership. While shared leadership is acknowledged as a powerful form of school administration, at the FIRST partner schools, the principals retained most of the power, made most of the administrative decisions unilaterally, and thus wielded tremendous influence on the staff's perception of the FIRST initiative and their willingness to fully participate.

At Community High School, relationships between staff and administrators were generally positive, and the Assistant Principal was particularly enthusiastic about the FIRST project. His enthusiasm would eventually lead him to overload the project with initiatives, but at the beginning, it served to create momentum, interest, and commitment among school staff.

During the first year, tensions between the four academy principals at Banner High School came to a head. When the former superintendent had made them equals as administrators, she had not provided them with any model for operating as such. The resulting power struggle defused improvement efforts and negatively impacted interpersonal dynamics. The SEDL facilitator sought to assuage hurt feelings and discover and

disseminate leadership models that might work between these four administrators. She was unsuccessful at finding such a model, and ultimately decided to focus the FIRST project on only one of the academies.

Leadership at Tall Pines was a very apparent area for potential improvement. The principal, though well meaning, seemed not to understand the function or practical value of shared leadership. While both a steering committee and campus leadership team were in place, there were no clearly defined areas of responsibility for each or between the two. The principal rarely shared substantive decision-making with either body, and in fact appointed some members of the campus leadership team despite district guidelines calling for their election. When the principal did delegate responsibility, he neither monitored nor followed up to gauge progress or to identify how he could support staff efforts. As a result, many tasks were never completed, or if completed, were not recorded. Within this environment, the SEDL facilitator sought to develop a shared focus and a sense of self-efficacy among the staff. While this approach yielded enthusiasm in small group settings, plans were often jettisoned in responses to some crisis or other, and no coherent improvement plan could be developed and maintained.

The principalship at San Fernando School and Pelican High School changed hands after the first year of the FIRST initiative. At each of these schools, SEDL facilitators “began again” with new administrators, and built upon the relationships they had established with school staff. At Pelican the facilitator was able to establish an immediate positive relationship with the new principal, while at San Fernando, teacher leaders maintained continuation of the project and specifically asked the new principal in the hiring interview if she was willing to support the SEDL project. In both instances, this turnover negatively impacted the

momentum of the project, but did not completely erase the achievements nor void the plans made for implementation of school improvement efforts.

Year 2. SEDL staff worked with FIRST school principals where they were, and in some cases, where they were not. When three of four principals in Banner High School’s new academy structure evidenced a lack of interest in or focus on how SEDL might support them, SEDL shifted its focus to full, supportive cooperation with the one principal who remained active and interested.

At Tall Pines Middle School, the need for better management of routine procedures impeded efforts at communication, change, and improvement. The SEDL facilitator worked to develop leadership skills of the principal and of school staff. She advocated for utilizing existing structures to share decision-making with the staff, and by the end of the project year, the campus leadership team was more involved in important decisions about school personnel and policies. In addition, the SEDL FIRST facilitator ultimately met with the school principal behind closed doors and confronted him about the need for stronger management and greater administrator visibility in the school. The principal was able to accept this counsel, and made changes. At Community High School, one principal’s enthusiasm for the focus on freshman students led him to over-build that program, nearly to the breaking point. The SEDL facilitator at Community High advocated for the staff and brought this principal to an awareness of—and sense of humor about—his tendency to take on too much.

At two FIRST schools, the project’s second year began with new principals. SEDL facilitators took responsibility for educating these administrators on the history, purposes,

and progress of the FIRST initiative. At Pelican High School, SEDL consistently supported and advanced the strengths of the new principal, even in trying times of adjustment. The SEDL facilitator pushed the new Pelican principal to define his vision of leadership, and supported the principal in implementing that vision throughout the predictable highs and lows of adjusting to a new school and a new assistant principal. At San Fernando school, the SEDL facilitator explained the staff's choice of mathematics as a school focus, and supported the principal in advancing this focus even as the district pushed for a shift to reading. The SEDL facilitator helped to assure the principal's interest in professional development and assessment were incorporated into the school improvement plans, and reminded the principal that change takes time. When this principal also left the school, SEDL began again with San Fernando's third leader, explaining the FIRST initiative's focus, detailing the history and achievements of the staff, and offering continued assistance.

Reflection. Through FIRST and other school improvement initiatives, SEDL has developed an abiding respect for the role of leadership in any school change effort. These efforts advance most effectively and smoothly in schools where principals are committed to high quality instruction leading to success for every student; are adept at handling both day-to-day operations as well as the crises that routinely break these routines; enjoy strong working relationships with district and school staff; and have both the professional security and commitment to advance and utilize teacher leadership. Unfortunately, principals with such broad and deep strengths are few and far between. In addition, all school leaders are subject to relocation, retirement, and reassignment. Shifts in leadership, even when anticipated, can have profound, lingering, deleterious effects on teacher morale and school improvement efforts.

SEDL supported principals who had skills and strengthened the skill base of principals who struggled with leadership. Developing personal relationships with these administrators was an important first step. Once this foundation was established, SEDL facilitators shared professional literature on leadership with principals and coached the principals on leadership strategies ranging from use of active verbs and first person plural (in their communication with teachers) to implementing significant shared leadership. SEDL also sought to connect these school administrators with a wide web of ongoing support, and so assisted in building relationships between FIRST school principals, and supported their professional development and attendance at national and local conferences.

Conclusions

Through the FIRST initiative, SEDL has developed a body of research on school improvement efforts that includes close study of five schools in the process of change, a widening library of strategies for supporting school change, and confirmation of the critical role change agents can play in schools undertaking improvement and change. As outside agents, change facilitators can develop a clearer view of dynamics that support and impede change efforts, and provide and build resources and abilities. In addition, they can offer assistance that is free of existing power relationships and requirements, can advocate for all school personnel, and, most importantly, can maintain the focus of improvement efforts on improved instruction and increased student achievement.

While increased student achievement is the goal of any responsible school improvement effort, administrative and organizational difficulties must often be addressed before a coherent view of the student body and its needs can be formulated and connected to staff capabilities and goals. Left unaddressed, issues

of leadership, organization, and context, as well as personal and social dynamics can derail school improvement efforts and sap the energy of the most gifted and dedicated teachers. Most critically, if these issues are not addressed and a schoolwide improvement effort is not advanced, the quality of education individual students receive can become simply a matter of chance and class assignment.

School change is a daunting proposal, and school change professionals must develop and utilize a deep and broad variety of strategies for assisting schools in change and improvement. Change facilitators must be able to respond to the particular issues of a school, and must be willing to devote time and attention to developing a clear understanding of the school's readiness and its cultural ethos, in order to adapt and implement change strategies that are specific to each school's circumstance. In addition, change agents must maintain an awareness of more universal issues in education—including administrative turnover, fluctuating funds, and student populations that are increasingly diverse and face increasing demands, both academic and personal.

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