

The Process of Change — Why Change, What to Do, and How to Do It

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The process of improving student performance goes by many different names. It has been referred to as school improvement, school reform, school reinvention, and school restructuring. No matter what it's called, it comes down to the single goal of raising student achievement through change.

In working with schools across the county that are making concerted efforts at school change, the International Center has found the following characteristics to be true:

- Change must be revolutionary in spirit and evolutionary in time frame.
- Each school community is unique and has its own “DNA”; what works in one does not necessarily translate to another.
- Schools are unique systems that tend to maintain the status quo and often produce unintended consequences in response to change.
- Schools as systems produce the results they are designed to produce. If different results are desired, the focus must be on changing the system, not simply demanding the system work better.
- School change can occur when guided by leadership, driven by data and supported through continuous professional learning.

A Model for Leadership and Change

The continuation of public education as we know it today is not guaranteed. The actions of school leaders will determine the fate of schools in the 21st century. One thing we know for sure is that status quo is not an option. Everyone is seeking change in schools. While all educators must play key roles in changing our schools, the burden is even greater for those in leadership positions. Leaders must respond to change appropriately and show others the way. They must take school staff on challenging journeys that the staff often would not take on their own.

Change in schools is dynamic. There is no recipe with a list of ingredients and simple steps, no detailed blueprint for schools to follow for success. However, there are lessons that can be learned from other schools. The International Center has worked with schools across the country to identify models, share best practices, conduct research, and support school leaders in facilitating changes that lead to improvement. This work has revealed that schools usually need to address four interconnected questions in order to achieve high academic standards for all students — **why, what, where, and how**. While these questions are interconnected, there is a sequence to addressing these questions. All schools must start with the *why* question. Next, the *what* question builds a common focus on what to change. Third, schools must set a direction with the *where* question. Finally, the *how* question deals with the implementation of change.

* This is an excerpt from Chapter 3 of *Leading Change in High Schools* by Dr. Richard D. Jones, published by the International Center for Leadership in Education in 2008.

To further elaborate:

- **Why** involves convincing educators, parents, and community members as to why a school needs to change.
- **What** is the content of change, built through a common focus. It involves using good data, research, and best practices to determine what needs to change once people understand why.
- **Where** defines the location and direction, which involves assessing the present status, agreement on a common direction, and defining ways to measure improvement in student achievement
- **How** is the process of change and involves determining how to change the school once people understand and embrace the why, what, and where.

Regrettably, many schools begin their improvement efforts in the reverse order — by first deciding how to do things differently. That is, they find a “solution” without clearly articulating the need or problem. Yet, if staff and stakeholders do not believe their school must change or understand what needs to change, the suggestion for how to change is likely to be ineffective or rejected. The solution is worthless for a problem that has not been acknowledged.

Figure 3.1 represents the International Center’s model of change, which is not simply about process. Change is driven by understanding the *why* of the need for change. Putting *why* in the center of the diagram illustrates its importance and the fact that it drives the change. *What*, *where*, and *how* become the three facets of change in schools. *What* defines the content and focus of the change. *Where* implies destination and where the school is headed and focuses on ways the school will evaluate its success in making changes. *How* describes the process of implementing the change. All three of these facets must be addressed for schools to accomplish successful change.

Leading Change in High Schools provides a framework and suggestions for leadership teams to improve their schools. It is not about simply adopting best practices, but rather about creating a culture that recognizes strengths and weaknesses, encourages innovation and initiative, and adapts best practices and ideas from others.

The nature of change is that it must be unique to local needs, forged through consensus, and built upon the unique strengths of each school. There is no one single solution to improving our schools. A combination of strategies is necessary to achieve a new vision of learning. The goal is not to make every school the same, but to enable each school to construct its own solutions.

Why Change Schools

The skills individuals need for success in the 21st century are vastly different from those needed in the past. Our education system must evolve in order to prepare students for the changing world in which they will live and work. American society is undergoing fundamental structural changes at the family, workplace, and community levels.

School reform begins with a desire by some — and at least a willingness of others — to be led. The administrators and staff in the most successful schools embrace change as exciting and challenging rather than intimidating and threatening. These educators seem to understand that schools today need to be updated in order to keep pace with a changing society and economy.

This nation’s fixation on preparing young people for college, while a worthy goal, can become

an impediment to achieving world-class education standards. Parents and others must recognize that while we must continue to prepare our young people to be good citizens and ready them for higher education, we must also add a third important purpose to education — learning to apply academic skills needed for the increasingly sophisticated workplace. Then parents and community leaders must be convinced that schools need to change. Only then will a school be able to create the type of pressure necessary to support moving the curriculum to a more relevant base.

School districts that have been successful in creating a culture or environment to support change have used a variety of techniques: print, radio, and television media; special events and presentations; community partnerships; and parent and student focus forums. While Americans as a group seem convinced that this country's schools must change, most parents and taxpayers think that their schools are just fine. High-performing schools clearly understand the realities of a changing society and, rather than feel threatened by these changes, seem to embrace the need for schools to evolve.

The International Center has assisted many school leaders in creating community and staff awareness of the need for change through research, presentations, print materials, white papers, newsletters, and video. These efforts address four major trends that must be acknowledged to ensure that our nation and our students are prepared to meet the challenges of the near and distant future:

- technology
- globalization
- demographics
- new generations in our classrooms

What to Change — Aspire for Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships for All Students

Finding successful practices in K-12 education that adequately prepare students for a changing world has been the purpose of the International Center since its inception in 1991. At that time, the International Center created a mission that addressed what needed to be done to prepare students for this changing world: *rigor and relevance for ALL students*.

While school districts across the country are increasingly using the words “rigor” and “relevance,” those terms are seldom defined. At the International Center, rigor and relevance are more than catchy words; they are part of a framework for defining what to change in schools and how to organize curriculum and instruction to prepare all students for the future.

“Relationships” was added as the third “R” based on the work with exemplary schools. Strong relationships are critical to completing rigorous work. Students are more likely to make a personal commitment to engage in rigorous learning when they know that teachers, parents, and other students actually care about how well they do. Relationships are the foundation on which rigor and relevance are built.

Defining Rigor

Academic rigor refers to learning in which students demonstrate a thorough, in-depth mastery of challenging tasks to develop cognitive skills through reflective thought, analysis, problem

solving, evaluation, or creativity. It is the quality of thinking, not the quantity, that defines academic rigor, and rigorous learning can occur at any school grade and in any subject.

Defining Relevance

Relevance refers to learning in which students apply core knowledge, concepts, or skills to solve real-world problems. Relevant learning is interdisciplinary and contextual. Student work can range from routine to complex in any grade and any subject. Relevant learning is created, for example, through authentic problems or tasks, simulations, service learning, connecting concepts to current issues, and teaching others.

There are students who do extremely well academically but who seem to be dysfunctional in the world beyond school. They lack the ability to apply their knowledge to real-life situations. Rigor without relevance can enable students to be successful in school, but result in failure once they no longer have that structure and guidance.

To help educators better understand these concepts and their importance to creating high-quality educational experiences that enable student success in and beyond the classroom, the International Center created the Rigor/Relevance Framework™ in the mid-1990s. The Rigor/Relevance Framework is based on two dimensions of higher standards and student achievement: knowledge and application.

Rigor/Relevance Framework

There is a continuum of knowledge that describes the increasingly complex ways in which we think. In defining rigor in this framework, we use the Knowledge Taxonomy, which is based on the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy:

- Awareness
- Comprehension
- Application
- Analysis
- Synthesis
- Evaluation

The second continuum, created by the International Center, is known as the Application Model. This recognizes that learning increases in complexity with higher levels of application. This scale can be used to describe increasing relevance. The five levels of this action continuum are:

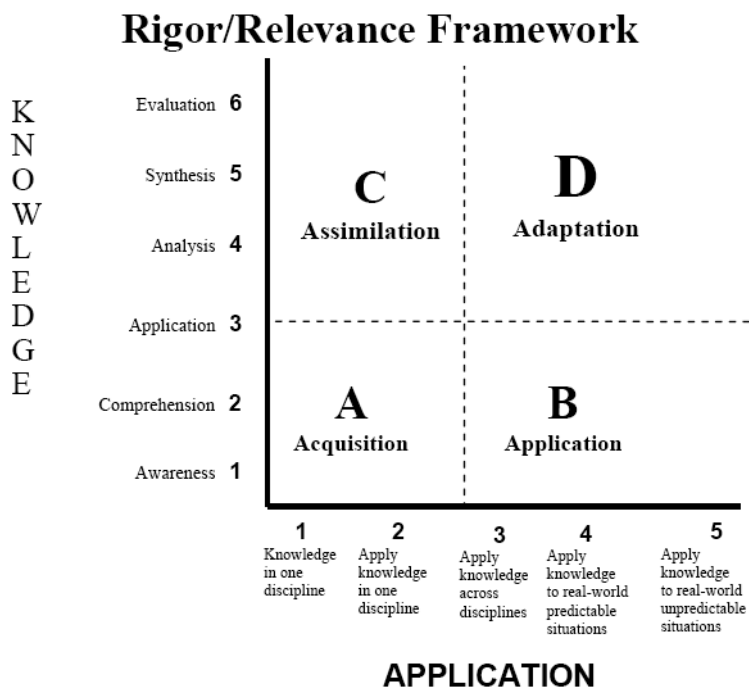
- Knowledge in one discipline
- Apply knowledge in a discipline
- Apply knowledge across disciplines
- Apply knowledge to real-world predictable situations
- Apply knowledge to real-world unpredictable situations

The Application Model describes how knowledge is put to use based on the levels of relevance. The high end signifies action — using the knowledge to solve complex real-world problems and to create projects, designs, and other works for use in real-world situations.

The Knowledge Taxonomy and Application Model are not separate scales but connected and relational. Often, as relevance is increased, so too is the knowledge level. The Rigor/Relevance

Framework, illustrated below, uses four quadrants that represent levels of learning. On the Knowledge axis, the framework defines low rigor as Quadrants A and B and high rigor as Quadrants C and D.

On the Knowledge axis, Quadrant A represents simple recall and basic understanding of knowledge for its own sake. Quadrant A is labeled “Acquisition” because students gather and store bits of knowledge and information.



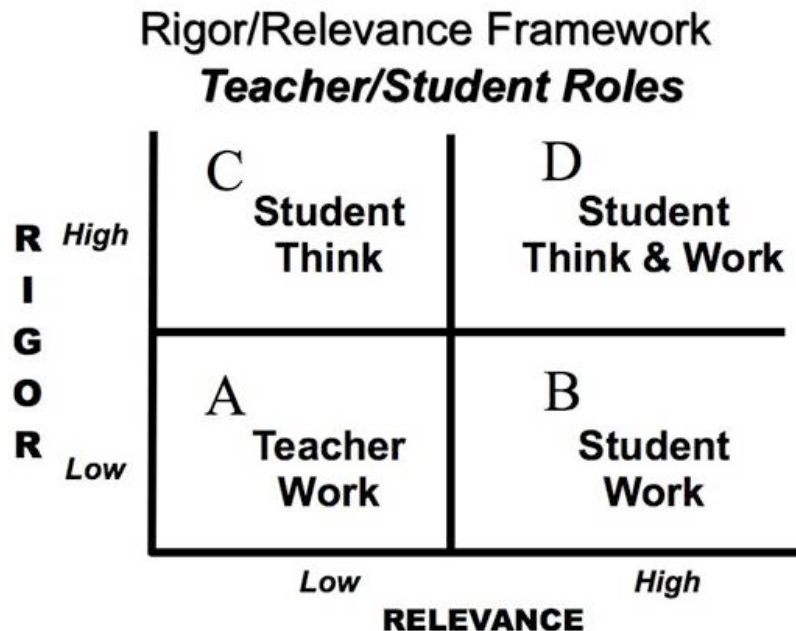
Quadrant C, “Assimilation,” represents more complex thinking, but still knowledge for its own sake. In Quadrant C, students extend and refine their acquired knowledge to be able to use it automatically and routinely to analyze and solve problems and to create unique solutions.

Quadrants B and D represent actions or high degrees of application. In Quadrant B, “Application,” students use acquired knowledge to solve problems, design solutions, and complete work. In Quadrant D, “Adaptation,” students have the competence to think in complex ways as they apply knowledge and skills they have acquired to new and unpredictable situations. Students create solutions and take actions that further develop their skills and knowledge.

For students to become lifelong learners, problem solvers, and decision makers, Quadrant B and D skills are required. In effect, our students need to know what to do when they do not know what to do. The Rigor/Relevance Framework provides a structure to enable schools to move all students toward that level.

One way to think about the Rigor/Relevance Framework in day-to-day instruction is in terms of the roles that teachers and students take. When instruction and expected student learning is in Quadrant A, the focus is on “teacher work.” Teachers expend energy to create and assess

learning activities — providing information, creating worksheets, and grading student work. The student is often a passive learner.



When the student expectation moves to Quadrant B, the emphasis is on the student doing real-world work. This student work often is more complicated than Quadrant A work and requires more time. Learning in Quadrant B is best described as “student work” because students are doing extensive real-world tasks.

Learning in Quadrant C is best described as “student think.” In this quadrant, students are expected to think in complex ways — to analyze, compare, create, and evaluate. The term that best describes Quadrant D activities is “student think and work.” Learning in Quadrant D is more demanding and requires the student to think and work. Roles shift from the teacher-centered instruction in Quadrant A to student-centered instruction in Quadrants B, C, and D. Teachers still work in Quadrants B, C, and D, but their role is more as a coach or facilitator.

Defining Relationships

Relationships describe the emotional connection, or lack of connection, between people. We are social/emotional creatures, and we recognize, respond to, seek out, and develop connections with other people. Relationships are a description of the nature and quality of those connections.

In the same way the Knowledge Taxonomy and the Application Model have helped define knowledge and application, a clear taxonomy for relationships can drive improvement in connections related to learning.

The Relationship Framework, created by the International Center, describes seven levels of relationships.

- **Level 0 is Isolation.** This is the lack of any positive relationships. The individual feels alone and isolated from relationships that would enhance learning.
- **Level 1 is Known.** A person must know someone before a relationship is formed. When teachers seek to develop relationships with students, the first step is getting to know them — their likes, dislikes, aspirations, learning styles, and families,
- **Level 2 is Receptive.** Often a learning relationship is described in terms of providing the assistance and support that a student needs. However, a preliminary step is for a teacher, for example, to show genuine interest in developing a relationship. This comes from frequent contact in multiple settings and active involvement.
- **Level 3 is Reactive.** In this case, one person receives guidance or support from another. This relationship yields emotional support or cognitive information.
- **Level 4 is Proactive.** At this level, the partners have made a proactive commitment to do more than assist when needed and take an active interest in supporting the other person.
- **Level 5 is Sustained.** Positive support is received from family members, peers, and teachers. These are relationships that will endure over a long period of time. This is the level of relationship that effective parents have with their children.
- **Level 6 is Mutually Beneficial.** This level occurs rarely in education, for at this point, both parties contribute support to one another for an extended period of time.

Relationship Framework

0. Isolation
1. Known
2. Receptive
3. Reactive
4. Proactive
5. Sustained
6. Mutually Beneficial

The various levels in the Relationship Framework help to identify the changes that need to be made to improve relationships. Relationships are not a dichotomy of good or bad. There are degrees of relationships, and teachers can work on behaviors that will improve learning relationships.

Where Do We Start, Where Are We Now, Where Are We Heading?

Begin with the End in Mind

Knowing that students need a rigorous and relevant curriculum taught in a climate of positive relationships is an important step in school reform. Once people have agreed to the need for rigor, relevance, and relationships, the difficult work then begins. Educators have this notion of rigor, relevance, and relationships, but they need more specific direction. They wonder: Where do we start? Where are we now? Where do we want to go? All these questions need to be defined in concrete quantifiable terms.

In this change model, the answer to the question, “Where?” is to know where you want end up as a result. Without a destination in mind, one road is as good as another. Any change can be considered. Schools need to know where they are going before they try to get there. While this may seem like common sense, most schools do not begin with a clear picture of what their desired student results are. Instead, schools jump into changes and solutions because that seems like the thing to do — be proactive, make a change, adopt a practice that is working somewhere else. While schools do need to change, changing too quickly or attempting to make changes without a clear destination will not be effective.

Even in the best of schools, leaders often have a sense that they need to change. This conclusion may have resulted in knowing that the school failed to serve some students adequately or because of less than satisfactory results for a subgroup on the state assessment. Change to most schools leaders seems to be about making things incrementally better. Most leaders believe there are many good things going on instructionally in their school. They see the prudent course as just changing a few things to address the visible problem of a few students not succeeding. Even in schools with significant student achievement issues, there is much good instruction. As a result, the prevailing approach of most school leaders is, “Let’s see if we can fix this problem.” or “What can we do to reach this group of students?” Changes tend to be incremental and at the same time detrimental. Schools start making changes and “fixing things” without a clear overall direction in mind.

Single Myopic Measures

Schools operated for a long time independent of formal and quantitative accountability systems. Over the past few decades, we have created stronger accountability measures but they focus only on a few aspects of schools – English language arts, mathematics, and science. This seems like the right thing to do. Who can argue with making sure that students acquire these basic skills? However, the impact on schools has been to make significant changes just to raise a test score. Practices such as eliminating recess and reducing instruction in the arts and technical courses have occurred to the detriment of students. Schools need to be cautious in making changes when the measures of success are very narrow.

The problem is that schools have left the designation of accountability measures to federal/state mandates. Schools need to be more proactive. Government may set one or two measures of schools success, but schools should design their own more comprehensive set of measures to determine their effectiveness.

This is the *where* in change — to examine where a school is heading. Attempting the change schools with only a few narrow measures of success, such as test scores, will not result in great schools and ultimately will force schools to discontinue practices that are an important and valuable part of learning. Schools must begin change with the end in mind — where is the school heading and will success be measured. The clarity and comprehensive nature of school accountability measures will drive changes around locally developed goals that enable continuous measurement of success.

The Learning Criteria to Support 21st Century Learners, developed by the International Center, is an opportunity for schools to translate their beliefs about teaching and learning into measurable goals. Educators today feel conflicted about accountability measures that are limited in scope yet powerful in consequences. As a result schools feel like they are driving a car down the highway only looking out the right side window. They are forced to pay attention to one aspect when they truly believe that they should be looking in all directions. Educators are tense in this dilemma of limited measure of accountability as if they were waiting for a collision to happen. Stepping back and redefining learning measures in a more comprehensive manner, including but not limited to state tests, will enable educators to embrace goal-setting and accountability measures that are more consistent with what they believe about teaching and learning.

Following are several questions that will help focus on the need for revised accountability measures.

- How do you identify school success?
- How do you describe an “educated student” in your school?
- Does your school community have a way to measure success? Is it the same way others measure your success?
- Are state tests the only thing that matters? If not, what else does?
- Do you want to put state tests in their proper perspective?
- Does being judged only on state tests narrow your focus of work?
- How do you really measure whether school improvements are working?
- How do you focus your school community on the needs of students?
- Do current measures of student learning fail to identify some of your “best students” ?

The Learning Criteria is one tool that supports school improvement processes through a stepwise data collection and analysis process. This is an essential and unique aspect of the International Center’s Model for Change, clarifying where schools want to be heading and set up specific measure to set goals and monitor progress. In the hands of a thoughtful and broad-based school leadership team, the Learning Criteria helps schools clarify their missions, prioritize problems and interventions, and critically review school performance. Further, these analyses provide critical rationales for establishing goals and developing action plans. Most importantly, the data generated by the Learning Criteria reflects the needs of learners in ways that less complex and more traditional measures overlook. The Learning Criteria is designed to provide a robust, comprehensive, and detailed portrait of school performance that clearly maps out a route for school improvement efforts.

An Overview of the Learning Criteria

The Learning Criteria is arranged in four data categories that school leaders can use to determine the success of their high schools in preparing students for current assessments and future roles and responsibilities. A school should have data indicators in all of the categories, and at least one indicator in each category should apply to the entire student population.

Foundation Academic Learning – Achievement in the core subjects of English language arts, math and science and others identified by the school.

Stretch Learning – Demonstration of rigorous and relevant learning beyond minimum requirements (participation and achievement in higher level courses, specialized courses, etc.).

Learner Engagement – The extent to which all learners (1) are motivated and committed to learning, (2) have a sense of belonging and accomplishment, and (3) have relationships with adults, peers and parents that support learning.

Personal Skill Development – (1) Measures of personal, social, service, and leadership skills and (2) demonstrations of positive behaviors and attitudes.

The International Center believes that core academic learning and state testing are essential, but not adequate. It defines the floor for learning and predominantly falls in Quadrant A on the Rigor/Relevance Framework.

Stretch learning is the most difficult to measure of the criteria because it compels schools to define how they are stimulating and stretching each student, not just the brightest. It challenges a school to find data to validate the claim that “all students will ...” If the school is truly stretching them, students will spend most of their time working in Quadrants C and D of the Framework.

Personal skill development gets to the heart of what makes a citizen, friend, or community member. What is the school doing to promote these qualities? Is it making leadership

opportunities available to all students? Is it creating a curriculum that teaches these skills and making them graduation requirements?

One of the features of education is that students are continuous learners. Student engagement identified the degree to which students exhibit the behaviors that show a continued interest in learning. Students need to be engaged before they can apply higher-order and creative-thinking skills. They learn most effectively when the teacher makes sense and meaning of the curriculum material being taught. This can only happen if the teacher has created a safe learning environment that encourages students to meet challenges and apply high-rigor skills to real-world unpredictable situations inside and outside of school.

Where to begin change is not with best practices, but with the school clearly focused on the end results of schooling. By having comprehensive indicators of student learning, a school is better prepared to select, adapt, and implement best practices that will make a difference in student learning.

How to Change

Components of School Excellence

The following eight components identify the more specific actions that schools must take to achieve rigor, relevance, and relationships. These eight are not sequential, but all must be addressed if schools are to prepare students adequately for their future. The aspects of the living system model should be reflected through each of these components.

1. Embrace a Common Vision and Goals — Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships for ALL Students. Schools, like any organization that seeks to improve, must have a common vision shared by all. Everyone must be committed to shared goals to measure success, and staff must have the same perspective as to what is important in the organization.

2. Inform Decisions Through Data Systems. Whole school/district reform is a continuous process guided by a well-developed data structure based on multiple measures of student learning. Highly successful schools/districts use quality data to make laser-like decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

3. Empower Leadership Teams to Take Action and Innovate. Schools that will be most successful in the 21st century are led by individuals who possess skills and attitudes to take action rather than defend the status quo. Leadership does not reside in a single position, but reflects the attributes, skills, and attitudes of the many staff members who take action and improve through effective learning communities.

4. Clarify Student Learning Expectations. Inconsistent state standards, tests, and community expectations create a wide-ranging and jumbled assortment of curricula, instructional practices, and classroom materials as well as varying expectations for rigor within and across grade levels. When districts take steps to clarify what students are expected to learn, they meet with success in improving student achievement.

5. Adopt Effective Instructional Practices. More than high test scores, successful instructional practices include having a wide range of strategies and tools to meet the needs of diverse learners in all disciplines and grade levels. Success in achieving state standards results

from not teaching in routine and proscriptive methods, but from teachers selecting successful instructional practices to meet the needs of all students.

6. Address Organizational Structures. Organizational structure should be determined by instructional needs. Only after a comprehensive review of instructional practices should schools begin to address the issues of organization such as school schedules, use of time, unique learning opportunities, school calendars, and physical structure.

7. Monitor Progress/Improve Support Systems. Highly successful programs recognize the need to monitor student progress on a regular basis. Successful schools use formative assessments in an organized, deliberate, and ongoing fashion to monitor student progress. Further, they use this data immediately to adjust instructional practices and intervene to meet student needs.

8. Refine Process on an Ongoing Basis. High-performing schools realize that success is a continuing and ever-changing course of action. This step in the process, in fact, should reinvigorate the process and cause school leaders to look at new and emerging challenges and explore potential solutions and successful practices from around the country.

Principles of Change

The three major facets uniquely define the change model of the International Center are: (1) aspire for rigor, relevance, and relationships, (2) begin with the end in mind, and (3) consider schools a biological system. These form the core of the change model. The next level is a series of **principles of change** that give greater detail to the practices that schools need to focus on to implement desired changes.

The following 13 principles provide practical and tactical direction for change in schools. These principles provide detailed guidance for the aspects of school change and exemplary practices that schools must address.

Decide with data, not opinions.

True data-driven achievement involves much more than merely reacting to low-test scores. The determination of what and how much to teach must be based on data that shows what the world beyond school expects high school graduates to know and be able to do. The International Center has contributed breakthrough research to assist schools with data in these important areas. The National Essential Skills Study, Lexile research on literacy requirements, and Curriculum Matrix data are all sources of information available to schools and district to guide instructional decisions and assess student performance.

Enlist passionate people who see the possibilities.

Leadership is one of the keys to school success. That leadership is started and modeled by the school principal but is not restricted to a single individual. Successful schools abound with models of distributed and shared leadership. Without the passionate people to initiate a change, any change will quickly lose momentum. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, refers to this act of getting the “right people on the bus.”

Focus on fluency in literacy.

Literacy is the highest priority in the nation's most successful schools. All teachers in all disciplines need to teach reading and writing skills that are both rigorous and relevant to the real world. Reading is fundamental and cuts across all learning.

Grow staff through professional learning.

A staff team that functions as a professional learning community comes together for learning within a supportive community. Participants interact, test their ideas, challenge one another's ideas and interpretations, and process new information gleaned from one another. Professional learning must evolve from the occasional burst of energy in a workshop to the multiple forms of ongoing professional growth and development in professional learning communities.

Hold teams accountable for learning results.

Good leaders not only set powerful visions and high expectations, but also follow up to make sure staff implement agreed-upon practices. It is the responsibility of the leader to keep reminding staff of the priority placed upon student learning, to stimulate staff reflection, and to encourage staff to continue to seek new solutions when practices are less than successful.

Inspire innovative instruction — instruction matters more than structure.

Just as standards and tests do not constitute a curriculum, high-performing schools recognize that curriculum is not instruction. Teachers must personalize learning through instructional strategies and approaches in classrooms that take into account the uniqueness of each student.

Join with the community to form true partnerships.

Community or business partners bring many benefits to a school, classroom, and teacher and are critical to effective schools.

Know your students, know your strengths, no excuses.

Schools need to find ways to personalize instruction. The first step toward personalization is to fully understand the culture, prior experiences, learning styles, backgrounds, and interests of its students.

Live lofty expectations.

Schools that establish high expectations for all students — and provide the support necessary to achieve these expectations — have high rates of academic success. High expectations have to be a way of life and drive daily behaviors and actions.

Measure learning by proficiency.

Many schools need to reexamine grading policies both at the school and classroom levels to ensure that student achievement measurement results in students being graded on proficiency rather than seat time.

Nurture positive relationships.

Strong relationships are critical to students completing rigorous work. Students are more likely to make a personal commitment to engage in rigorous learning when they know teachers, parents, and other students actually care about how well they do.

Offer multiple pathways to achievement.

Rather than holding instructional approaches constant and tolerating different results in student achievement, multiple pathways create different options for students to acquire the same learning.

Prioritize the curriculum — less is more.

When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. Teachers need a clear way to help differentiate among curriculum topics that are essential for all students and those that are merely nice to know. The International Center's Curriculum Matrix is a resource that can be used as a road map to lead to more targeted instruction and assessment.

Since 1991, the International Center's mission has been to prepare ALL students to be college-work-life ready through delivering rigorous and relevant curriculum based on positive relationships. That basic mission and partnering support is and has been a focus for change and continuous improvement for hundreds of districts and thousands of schools across the nation.

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