Appendix A   The Abigail Francis Middle School

An Illustration of the Self-Study Cycle in Practice

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This Appendix illustrates the self-study cycle described in the Guide through a narrative about the Abigail Francis Middle School, a fictitious school that combines the characteristics and experiences of a number of actual schools, in which a school-improvement team (SIT) wrestles with the problem of students' difficulty acquiring high levels of literacy.

The School-Improvement Team Gets Started

Abigail Francis Middle School is in transition. The school is located in Martin City, a city that has only recently begun to see an increase in population (currently 135,000). Eighty years ago, Martin was thriving, but when the mills that were its livelihood left town, the residents followed. Federal highway construction divided neighborhoods, public housing consolidated the neediest families, and absentee landlords owned a large percentage of the housing stock. Within the past decade, the city has increasingly become the first stop for new immigrants. The school district has also been experiencing growing pains, because it was not equipped for the demographic shift or the increased school population. The superintendent, the third in seven years, reorganized staff, resources, and buildings as part of a new city vision.

The district's reorganization, coupled with drastically changing demographics, was a challenge for the incoming SIT coordinator. Upon meeting with the team, she recognized that participation and morale were low. The team, three teachers in total, complained that the principal spent so much time on administrative tasks that she couldn't spend time on student achievement and teacher issues. When asked about parent involvement, someone mumbled, "parents don't have the time."

The coordinator went to work. First she met with the principal and gained a monthly one-hour commitment from the principal to school-improvement planning efforts. Further, the principal promised to find the funding for ten hours of training for the team, provided it was delivered in-house and was directly related to whole-school improvement. Once the principal was on board, the coordinator inventoried the skills and membership on the SIT. A parent had not served on the team for the past four years and the budget and data specialists had declined to serve for another year. There were no people of color on the team, despite the new ethnic picture of the school.

The coordinator assembled a wish list of additional members for the team, which included teachers with skills specific to the task at hand and residents reflective of the school census (77 percent Caucasian, 15 percent African American, and 8 percent Latino). Recruitment was slow but she managed to persuade three new members to join the team: two parents and one teacher. The parents she found by visiting local churches and attending community meetings. One of the parents was a budget analyst for a local marketing firm. The other, the only person of color on the team, had a child in a self-contained classroom. The team now had expertise in curriculum, budgeting, leadership, and assessment. It also had real-life

parent experience in regular and special education. The parents provided a community voice, but no member had specific skills related to expanding parent engagement. All admitted that they were unfamiliar with data-informed decision making.

Teamwork Takes Time

The first meeting of the full team was difficult. Although the coordinator had some experience in facilitation, she struggled to keep the team focused on the task at hand rather than on the discouraging circumstances at the local and state levels. In reviewing current school-improvement efforts, one member kept coming back to the lack of funding at the state level; another firmly asserted that school-improvement teams wouldn't accomplish anything because "the plans aren't implemented or evaluated – they just collect dust in a corner somewhere." Three members monopolized the entire meeting and all left frustrated.

The coordinator was frankly discouraged but knew that such sentiments were common. Even so, she knew she had to move the committee toward a plan that was concrete. It had to be something that would be utilized and it had to move the school to act.

The following meeting was more promising. The members acknowledged their frustration and need to vent. The first order of business was to collectively create the ground rules for meeting conduct. The coordinator began by asking each member to describe the worst meeting they'd ever attended – a great icebreaker, since they all had stories to tell, each of which was funnier than the last. The team easily transitioned to creating their own rules, the most important of which were the two-minute speaking rule, the round-robin approach to participation, and guidelines for respectful dialogue. They proceeded to create a timeline and meeting schedule, and each parent committed to requesting two hours off from work

to tour schools when students were in the classroom.

The next two meetings concentrated on the broadest school images. There was consensus that the mission statement ("to provide each child with a challenging academic program in a safe, nurturing environment that will encourage our students to achieve their potential") was on target, and focus areas for the self-study (School Climate, Professional Development, Curriculum and Instruction, Support Services, School Organization, and Community Connections) were appropriate. Each focus area also had appropriate quantitative or qualitative performance indicators so that progress could be tracked over time.

The Essential Question Is Developed

The fifth meeting was a brainstorming session. Although many potential issues were considered, the Francis Middle School SIT chose reading skills as a major area for school improvement. The standards used by the Francis school were largely reflective of state and national reading standards. Broadly, the standards stated that a student should be able to

- use general skills and strategies of the reading process;
- use reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts;
- use reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of information texts.

State assessment data revealed that 67 percent of Francis students met or exceeded the standard on general skills, and gaps for each subset (African American, Latino, Special Education, English-Language Learner) were below five percent. However, on the

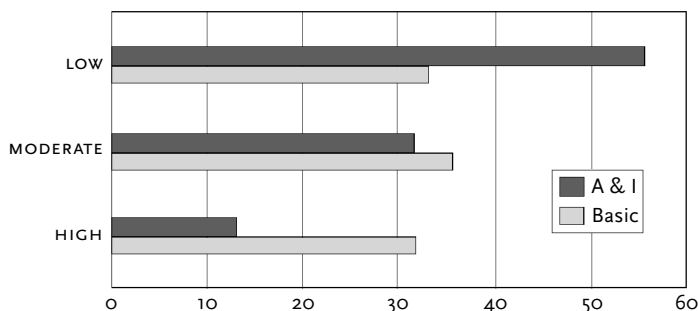| Subgroup	Reading Basic			Reading Analysis and Interpretation		
	HIGH	MODERATE	LOW	HIGH	MODERATE	LOW
TOTAL	31.96	35.02	33.02	13.00	31.34	55.66
African American	27.35	35.32	37.33	9.20	26.62	64.18
Hispanic	24.25	41.22	34.53	7.58	27.70	64.72
White	35.50	32.25	32.25	18.25	30.88	50.87
Other	26.70	41.00	32.30	11.12	27.65	61.23
Special Education	14.33	49.40	36.27	2.50	23.39	74.11
English-Language Learner	16.35	47.60	36.05	4.00	25.77	70.23
Low Income	21.00	44.00	35.00	9.34	28.99	61.77

Figure 3. Percent of Francis students performing at each level in Reading Basic and in Reading Analysis and Interpretation skills

more demanding analytical and interpretation portions of the assessment, all subgroups' performance levels decreased by 20 percent or more. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3 indicates the percentage of all students performing at low, moderate, and high levels on the two reading tests. When reading results were broken down according to the state standards, the testing service indicated the following problem areas:

- understanding inferred and recurring themes;

- making connections between motive of characters or the cause for complex events in texts and those in his or her life;

- making inferences and drawing conclusions about story elements;

- differentiating between fact and opinion in informational texts;

- using new information to adjust and extend knowledge base.

The team struggled to find a question that squarely addressed student deficits and engaged teachers in all content areas and grades. Their first question was too narrowly focused on testing rather than analysis and interpretation: "How do we improve reading scores at the eighth-grade level?" While the question names an issue that needs to be addressed, it relates more directly to testing and does not have direct implications for day-to-day operations.

The second question was too specific: "How do we teach eighth-grade students to make inferences in reading literature?" Although this question is related to teaching and learning, not all stakeholders (particularly teachers in other grades and subject matters) agreed it was an important issue.

Like the story of the three bears, the Francis team finally got it just right: "How do we improve students' abilities to read informational text so that by eighth grade, they can interpret what they read?" Although this is still a significant challenge, it is measurable, it relates directly to teaching and learning, and it has implications for the classroom.

Data Presents a Challenge

The Francis SIT briefly observed the classrooms and examined student work in light of the essential question. They arrived at the following general conclusions:

- Staff emphasize middle school strategies; most teach to the standards.

- Writing is practiced across the curriculum.

- Silent reading time occurs every week.
- Student expectations are posted in about one-third of the classrooms.
- In a handful of classrooms, students keep journals.

The observational exercise provided insights about school practices, but it did not paint the whole picture of the school, nor did it help the team understand *why* students were not learning to draw inferences. The school over the years had amassed literally volumes of information, but the team had no idea how to organize and examine it. By group consensus, they decided to use the training funds to hire a school-improvement specialist. They chose from a state consultant list an individual who specialized in school-improvement planning and data analysis.

They spent one meeting identifying and trying to organize the data that already existed. They pored over surveys, interviews, external visit data, census information, questionnaires, prior self-studies, assessment data, disciplinary reports, budgets, curricula, professional development schedules, and attendance records. Frustration set back in as they realized they knew little about the school and even less about organizing the data.

Matching School Information and Performance Indicators

The school-improvement trainer was well equipped for the meeting. He began by posting throughout the room ten sets of indicators for monitoring school performance. He explained that this list was not the only possible list; it was simply the list he chose to use. "These performance indicators," he explained, "are the keys to understanding *why* your students have low test scores." He asked the group to arrange all of the school information under each appropriate heading. Some items fell logically under one heading; others seemed to fit under many and still others didn't seem to have a place.

After about thirty minutes, the trainer brought the group back to the table. A few items were still at the table but he concentrated on the ten piles of data. "In thirty minutes," he said, "you have sorted years of information into ten categories. Maybe you know more than you think you know."
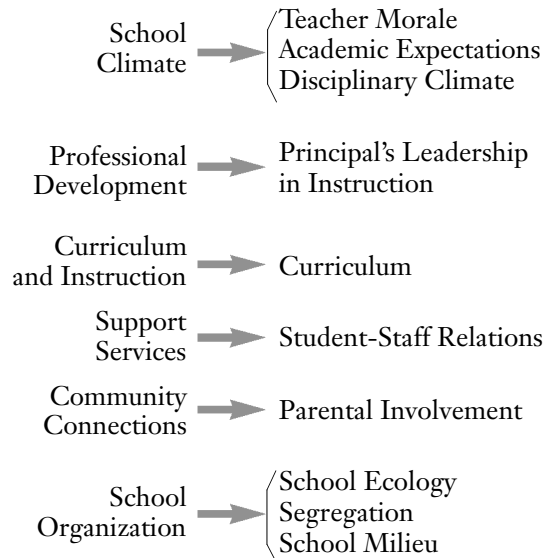
TEN SETS OF INDICATORS FOR MONITORING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

- *School ecology* (resources available, school and class size)
- *School milieu* (characteristics of school and staff)
- *Curriculum* (intended and implemented)
- *Student demographics* (breakdown of students in schools and classes based on gender, ethnicity, or achievement)
- *Academic expectations* (of parents, teachers, and students; short- and long-term expectations for students
- *Disciplinary climate* (expectations and awareness of expectations among students, staff, and parents)
- *Parent involvement* (day-to-day participation in class and at home)
- *Student-staff relations* (academic and nonacademic)
- *Principal's leadership in instruction*
- *Teacher morale*

*NOTE: Indicators adapted from Willms 1992.

Matching Performance Indicators and Focus Areas

The next task was a bit more challenging. The school-improvement trainer handed each team member a piece of paper. In one column were the ten indicators; in the other column were the school's six focus areas. Their job, he explained, was to connect each of the ten sets of indicators to the six focus areas. What began as an individual activity emerged into full group discussion. "Where does principal's leadership fit?" said one. "What about teacher morale?" said another. After much discussion, the final grouping looked like this:

School Climate → Teacher Morale / Academic Expectations / Disciplinary Climate

Professional Development → Principal's Leadership in Instruction

Curriculum and Instruction → Curriculum

Support Services → Student-Staff Relations

Community Connections → Parental Involvement

School Organization → School Ecology / Segregation / School Milieu

The ten stacks of information were placed in their focus areas. The information that had remained uncategorized from the earlier exercise was also classified according to the focus areas. This included guidance reports and information about after-school and enrichment activities and community outreach efforts. At this point, they had what one teacher called "a learning moment." As if looking at the focus areas for the first time, they wondered whether School Climate and Support Services could be collapsed into one focus area. After a brief discussion, they did just that.

Now they had all of their data separated by focus area. The task for the next meeting was to pull out the data relevant to the essential question. Each member left with a homework assignment: "Before we examine the data, in light of our essential question, what do *you* think some of the problems are? How could the school measure them?"

The Team Focuses Its Efforts

The Abigail Francis team members arrived with homework in hand, but their work was based more on whole-school improvement than on the essential question. Each member surmised what the school needed to improve overall and how those improvement efforts could be measured. The school-improvement trainer, realizing that he didn't want to lose their enthusiasm or sense of accomplishment, altered the working session from specific to broad. He also knew that the whole-school focus would serve an important purpose in the long run.

For the first time in the weeks of meetings, parents spoke up first. The mother whose child was in special education asserted that the school-home connection certainly affected student performance and suggested regular parent-teacher contact and parent strategies for homework help. She added some scathing commentary about the after-school program her child attended. "I just don't know what the purpose of the program is. Is it to help with schoolwork? Because my child comes home and his homework isn't done. Are any of these programs evaluated? How do we as parents find one that isn't a waste of time and money?"

The other parent was concerned with budgetary issues. "A lot of the problems, I think, stem from poor use of resources. In my work, we do a cost-benefit analysis of programs and, if they're not working, we either figure out what's wrong or we scrap them."

The trainer gave all members a chance to voice their issues and observed, quite logically, that each spoke out of individual expertise. He recorded each comment and, when they were through, he said, "What each of you said is powerful, but now we need to take it to a deeper level. How can you take each issue you raised and put it in the form of a question that addresses higher-level reading skills?" He then used the parent-teacher connection as an illustrative example. "The importance of the connection is clear," he said, "so let's connect it to reading." The following questions emerged from the discussion:

- How often do teachers speak to parents about the students' reading strengths or weaknesses?

- What types of training or advice does the school or teacher offer to parents to help students with reading?

- What information does the school provide to parents about reading standards?

- What volunteer opportunities are offered to parents in the school library or in reading programs?

A teacher added, "But what about reading at home and hours watching television, items that have been proven to affect reading?" "Exactly," said the trainer. "You are now in the process of assembling some of the community-connection/parent-engagement questions that may be examined as part of your self-study focus on higher-level reading skills.

Abigail Francis Middle School was on its way. There were still data to examine and achievement goals to write, but they were focused; they were determined; and, most of all, they could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The School Puts Together a Portfolio

After completing its self-study, the Francis school put together a portfolio containing the following information (the source of data is indicated in parentheses). Each school-improvement focus area was prefaced with a paragraph indicating current status as well as long-and short-term goals.

School Climate

- Student, parent, and teacher surveys on student-achievement expectations, reading habits, hours watching television, time home alone (state).

- Student suspension data (state).

- Teacher survey about barriers to reform, including questions about instructional leadership (state).

- School rules and regulations handbook (school and district).

- School visit report (school).

- Student survey about the extent to which they connect with teachers in varying situations about school and nonschool issues (state).

- Guidance reports (school).

- After-school and enrichment-activity enrollment and evaluations (district).

- Information from the school nurse and health-assessment information (school and state).

Curriculum and Instruction

- Lesson plans (school).
- Rubrics for standards (school or district).
- Teacher reports of familiarity with state standards (state).
- Extent of team teaching and common planning time (school).

Professional Development

- Professional development courses offered (district and state).
- Professional development courses taken by teachers (state).
- Teacher questionnaire about professional development needs (district).

School Organization

- Census data: level of adult education, crime statistics, family structure (U.S. Census).
- School finance data, disaggregated into instruction, instructional support, and leadership; per pupil expenditures by program area (state).
- Student demographic data (school and district).
- Mobility report (district).
- Teacher experience and qualifications in reading (state and school).
- School mission and vision (school).
- Attendance and enrollment data (district and school).

Community Connections

- Parent phone log (school).
- Use of parent information line (district).
- Frequency of parent volunteerism, offered and actual (school).
- Attendance at school-community night (school).

- Incidental community observations (school).
- School/public-library collaborative programs (district and school).
- External support, as measured by community partners (district and school).
- Parent survey information (state)