inquiry

Making School Improvement Part of Daily Practice

and

action

Annenberg Institute for School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

inquiry and action

Making School Improvement Part of Daily Practice

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Contents

Part II. Worksheets
for Use with the School-Improvement Guide

Contains worksheet templates and samples to help a school carry out some of the school-improvement tasks described in Part I: The School-Improvement Guide.

Part III. Rubrics and Standards of Practice
for Use with the School-Improvement Guide

Contains rubrics used in Boston and San Diego that a school can adapt to its own school-improvement efforts; describes a set of standards of practice formerly used by Chicago Public Schools (complete standards are available on the Annenberg Institute Web site at <www.annenberginstitute.org/tools/images/Chicago.pdf>.)

Preface
Getting Good at School Improvement

According to a piece of lore that has circulated among British school reformers, you only have to address the weakest 10 percent of an area's schools each year to make noticeable improvements. The good news in this philosophy is that you do not have to take on everything at once. The bad news is that improvement never ends.

In our nation's current environment, it is no longer acceptable that a great number of schools routinely fail to educate all their students well – especially urban schools serving largely minority and disadvantaged students. Furthermore, even the highest-ranked schools will always need improvement, because the conditions under which adults educate, and children learn, are always changing. We set standards that raise our expectations for all children; computers make it possible for children with disabilities to better demonstrate what they learn; school finance laws change; Congress passes new regulations on the sweeping scale of No Child Left Behind; we learn ways to deliver ever greater supports for disadvantaged students. The work of improvement is always with us.

Improvement matters. It affects the lives of children. It is vital to "get good at it." Improvement must become a permanent part of school practice, not a one-time or occasional event.

This publication is intended to help schools or school-improvement teams develop the habits of collaboration, discussion, inquiry, and decision making that are necessary for ongoing improvement through a permanent cycle of inquiry and action.

The intent of the approach outlined here is to build the trust and ownership that we have learned are the bedrock for school improvement and to provide practical information and tools to help schools identify and carry out the tasks that support continuous improvement.

Many districts and states now provide their schools with established improvement processes. This publication is intended to complement those materials, not replace them. It can be used by state or district administrators seeking to apply a consistent and effective approach to continuous improvement in all their schools. It can also be used by school-level administrators or other stakeholders, either to help address state or district requirements for improvement or to initiate their own improvement process.

We have organized *Inquiry and Action: Making School Improvement Part of Daily Practice* into three parts. Part I is the School-Improvement Guide. Parts II and III contain tools – worksheets, templates, and rubrics – to use with the Guide. You will find more resources on the Web at <www.annenberginstitute.org/tools>, including a list of publications and a database of school-improvement tools organized into major categories, such as school climate and safety, student performance, professional development, and leadership. Each category contains a wide range of tried-and-true tools – guides for focus group discussions, interviews, surveys, and more – that have been used effectively in school settings by school reform organizations across the United States, Canada, and Europe. A team of reviewers with extensive experience in class-

rooms and schools made sure that only practical, clear, and productive tools were selected.

We hope that you find this publication and its associated tools useful. We especially hope that it supports you in creating the habits of reflection, inquiry, and action that fuel continuous school improvement. We wish you and your students great rewards for the challenging work you are about to undertake.

Dennie Palmer Wolf
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Acknowledgments

The School–Improvement Guide

Introduction to School Improvement

The term *school improvement*[1] refers to the process of altering specific practices and policies in order to improve teaching and learning. There are three driving ideas behind the process:

- Agency. This is the notion that a school community (administrators, teachers, family members, and students) can collect, analyze, and act on information to reorganize and redistribute their human, social, fiscal, and technical resources in order to improve student achievement continually.

- A community of adult learners. It is important to build a community of adult learners who share a common interest in creating a stronger school. Because of the emphasis on the whole school, a review or self-study does not target any individual or single classroom within the building. Rather, it targets how to improve current practices and policies that stand in the way of student learning.

- Continuous professional inquiry. This is the curiosity and will of individuals and groups as a whole to ask about the strengths and weaknesses of current practices and policies, to act, and then to monitor the effects of those actions.

Across the country schools and school districts have increasingly begun to hold themselves accountable for school improvement by internally reviewing their practices and policies. In some districts and states, district central offices and state departments of education have combined school-conducted *internal reviews* with *external reviews* as a way of asking administrators, faculty, and staff to "account" for their practice and its impact on student achievement.

A school *self-study cycle*, led by a *school-improvement team* composed of people within the school who conduct an internal review through a cycle of *inquiry* and action, is a crucial part of the response to these growing accountability requirements. The conclusions of the self-study can inform both the school community itself and external audiences, such as the school board or superintendent, about where the greatest challenges lie and what specific kinds of help the school community believes it needs. By conducting a self-study, a school can become an active partner in the school accountability process.

School Improvement Today: A Structural Feature of School Systems

Why is there so much current emphasis on school improvement? Haven't schools always wanted to improve? The answer to these questions is that, in today's context of increased accountability, school improvement is here to stay. School improvement is firmly embedded in district and state planning and accountability structures. Federal mandates have intensified these accountability challenges at an unprecedented level with external testing directives and consequences for low performance. In this atmosphere of high demands and little time, schools are increasingly under pressure to improve – and to do so quickly.

This section describes some of the ways in which the *school-improvement process* has become an integral and necessary part of school and system reform.

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[1] Terms in italics are defined in the Glossary on page 37.

Standards-Based Reform and No Child Left Behind

With passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools, districts, and state departments of education will be held increasingly accountable for student academic performance, as measured against explicit *standards*. Schools must raise student achievement overall, while reducing the gap between current achievement levels and existing state-level expectations of student achievement. They are also expected to close the gaps in achievement between groups of students based on income, race, gender, native language, and disability. Schools, districts, and states that are unable to exhibit annual progress in reducing these gaps risk a range of potential interventions and consequences.

This layer of federal intervention is forcing many schools to reexamine what they teach and how they teach in order to meet changes in expectations. The self-study cycle for school improvement can help schools look deeply at what they teach, how they teach, how they allocate resources, and how they structure the use of professional development – all in the context of meeting new standards and adapting to changing requirements.

Mandated Internal Reviews for Accreditation or Other External Requirements

There are six accrediting associations across the country that require an internal review, or self-study, by the school itself in addition to an external review visit to catalyze school improvement. Though accreditation requirements differ from region to region, adoption of a school-improvement process can assist in preparation for an accreditation review.[2]

Some states or districts also require school self-study processes as part of a school-improvement plan.

Charter Schools

More and more states across the country are providing funding for charter schools, and those that already support charters are expanding implementation. For these schools, a school-improvement process can provide a method for internal examination and continuous improvement, as well as a process for articulating the practices a community desires a school to adopt. Moreover, when the process is designed correctly, school improvement lends itself to community input – a mandated element of all charter legislation.

ESEA Funding to States for Effective Comprehensive Reforms

Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, states may apply for money to fund the implementation of comprehensive school reforms, based upon scientifically conducted research and effective practices, including an emphasis on basic academics and parental involvement so that all children can meet challenging state academic-content and academic-achievement standards. A self-study process can help schools assess their needs and inform the selection of a research-based model that is most appropriate for its conditions and interests. Additionally, as schools and districts embrace these models, school-improvement processes

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[2] For instance, the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) requires an internal review as part of its accreditation process for secondary schools within its geographic jurisdiction (Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island).

can help schools implement and integrate a model into daily practices, understand where and why change is stalled, or check current status of these programs.

The Self-Study Cycle: A Philosophy of Continuous Improvement

If you awoke one day and found your living room three inches deep in water, you wouldn't ignore the flood and move the couch to the second floor. You would look for the source of the leak, define the extent of the damage, and contemplate remedies. The same can be said about genuine school improvement. Schools don't get repaired unless questions are raised by those who know the school best. By creating and

nurturing a culture of inquiry, a school can embed its philosophy and mission in its school-improvement efforts. Figure 1 depicts a School Self-Study Cycle – a process for building continual improvement into the structure of a school.

This process has the potential (New York State Education Dept. 1996) to

- place an emphasis on teaching and learning;
- build a collaborative professional community; and
- acknowledge the power and importance of the individuals who educate our children.

This guide was designed with the expectation that many schools have been provided with their own materials to help them maneuver through a school-improvement process. The Guide and its associated tools can supplement materials provided to you by your district central office or state department of education.

The tasks described in this guide have been placed in an order that may be helpful for those who are "starting from scratch." Few schools start from scratch, however, so use the parts of the Guide that best fit your needs, recognizing that the order need not be regimented. Also, recognize that some tasks may need to be repeated as your needs and conclusions dictate.

Many school-improvement teams will tell you that the tasks overlap, vary in degree of importance, and differ in the challenges that they represent for specific school communities. To illustrate this process, in Appendix A we have provided a case study of a fictitious middle school, based on a composite of several real middle schools, in which a team from the school puzzles out how to address the low literacy skills of its students.

Figure 1. A school self-study cycle

Getting Started

School improvement is a lot of work. It requires that several key conditions be in place to succeed:

- Leadership. Support from school leadership affirming the value of the work of an internal school-improvement team, providing the resources required to help the team be successful, and encouraging cooperation between the school-improvement team and the larger school community are essential.

- Time. This type of inquiry takes time. For a school-improvement team this means time to meet, plan, and coordinate their work. For the school as a whole this means time to collect, organize, and analyze the *data* and to discuss action steps and alternatives. Any of these may call for common planning time (as offered to many teachers in block scheduling), use of professional development opportunities, after-school meetings, and/or retreats.

- Skills. Several types of skills are required to conduct an inquiry process. These skills need be possessed only by a few to build the skills of many or may be obtained from outside the school building through local universities, community-based organizations, regional education labs, or other technical assistance organizations.

- Will. This is a prerequisite. At the very minimum, a handful of the faculty need to see that examining and changing their practice is a worthwhile task.

> ### USING EXISTING STRUCTURES
>
> A new team doesn't always need to be created. There may already be a team of staff and faculty involved in existing reform efforts at the school who act as or could become a school-improvement team. The important aspects of an SIT are: the members can meet together regularly; they're able to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of an SIT; they have the respect of the school community; and they have the characteristics noted in this section for an effective team.

The School-Improvement Team

The way to start a school-improvement process is to create a school-improvement team (SIT). The SIT is a group of people who work together to develop, lead, and coordinate the school-improvement process.

In addition to playing a major role in improving the school, SIT members have often found participation in the team to be a valuable professional development opportunity.

Characteristics of an effective school-improvement team include:

- Small size. Groups of six to eight people are relative easy to convene and coordinate for regular meetings.

- Representative group. Different constituencies from the school community, including administrators, teachers, parents, and students, are represented.

- Coordinated effort. The team works closely with the principal to make sure the group holds regular meetings, that tasks are assigned and completed, and that progress is made toward established objectives.

- Commitment to the task. The school demonstrates its commitment by providing time and resources (equipment, cleri-

cal support, budget, etc.). The members of the team should evidence a strong commitment to the school-improvement process, including the self-study.

The team members decide who will take specific roles on the team and determine the responsibilities of each role. Ensuring that everyone is clear about individual and collective responsibilities will help the team to function well.

The SIT coordinator is usually a school employee freed from other duties to fulfill the following responsibilities:

- assist with selection of the SIT so that it is representative of the school community;
- support the team members in their tasks and projects;
- work with administrators to obtain appropriate training and support for the team;
- report progress of the team to the school community, including faculty and staff, administration, parents, caregivers, students;

- hold regular meetings;
- keep the SIT active and focused;
- coordinate the activities of the team with the larger school-improvement agenda as well as the district- and state-level agendas.

SIT members are equally important to the team. Their responsibilities are to:

- meet with other members of the school community to inform them of the self-study and its objectives and processes;
- obtain the input of faculty and staff and incorporate it into the self-study process;
- collect data;
- meet regularly to discuss progress, make preliminary conclusions, and reflect on what data shows, as well as on the process itself;
- assist with documentation and evaluation of the self-study;
- assign and negotiate collection tasks within the school community; for example, each member might take the lead on a separate *focus area* or specific departments may be asked to collect data in their area of the school (e.g., data on math instruction).

The team should participate in an orientation that includes:

- review of the current school-improvement strategy (theory of action), past efforts, and current assessment of student performance;
- discussion of the pros and cons of team membership;
- development of ground rules of the group, including how it will approach tasks, make decisions, and hold each other accountable.

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

Two strategies to increase commitment to the team and school improvement are to decrease the loads of those best suited to be on the change team and provide formal recognition of their efforts. Underscore repeatedly and through a variety of methods that the team is working to improve the way the school operates, not target or assess individuals within the school.

Fostering Adult Learning and Cooperation

The primary role of the SIT is to work with the members of the school community to produce an in-depth picture of the many dimensions of school practice and a common awareness of the school's strengths, needs, and challenges. Though many staff, students, and parents may not need to participate in a self-study to come to an *individual* understanding of school practice, a *common* understanding requires moving beyond personal perspectives to collectively construct an image of school practice.

To achieve this will require learning together through the collection, organization, and analysis of data to draw conclusions about the school. The team must model and assist with the adoption of a process of communicating and cooperating – having conversations – with each other. Such a process should be characterized by:

- thoughtful inquiry;
- active listening;
- frequent reflection;
- honest and respectful dialogue;
- use of data.

Some of these characteristics may be absent from current conversations between faculty members, but may be cultivated by using a set of *protocols*, or group norms for discussion. Over the years many organizations and individuals have developed a number of protocols, or norms, to guide conversations (see sidebar on this page).

Though they vary, most protocols are led by a facilitator, who introduces the objective of the discussion, reminds the group of any ground rules for the conversation, and asks everyone to briefly introduce themselves. An individual or a group of individuals pose a question or present a problem along with some background infor-

mation. This person or persons are often referred to as the presenter(s). A structured conversation takes place, commonly including a part in which the presenter listens, without making comments, to the other participants, to encourage active listening rather than defensiveness. Usually the conversation concludes with a *debrief*, or evaluation of the process itself.

The sidebar on the next page outlines, in brief, the process of using a protocol to guide a discussion. It can be duplicated for use by your school-improvement team. The process overall usually lasts an hour. Although prescriptive in places, the noted steps can build the culture of adult learning and contribute to greater cooperation between colleagues.

RESOURCES ON USING PROTOCOLS TO FOSTER COOPERATION

- Sample protocols, or group norms for having structured conversations such as the ones described in this section, are available at <www.annenberginstitute.org/tools>, along with other tools for school improvement.

- The Annenberg Institute (2002) video package *Looking at Teaching and Learning through Peer Observation* describes and provides several protocol models for internal and external reviews.

- Other processes for structured conversations are described and examined more deeply in two Annenberg Institute video packages: *Looking at Student Work: A Window into the Classroom* and *Critical Friends Groups in Action*. Both show how the techniques described may be used to look at the most readily available form of information we have – student work.

- For more models of protocols, see Allen & McDonald, n.d.; Dowd, n.d.; Cushman 1999 in Works Consulted in the Creation of This Guide on p. 39–41.

Sample Protocol to Guide a Structured Conversation

A question, problem, or task is posed by a presenter.

The purpose of a question could be to evaluate an item, practice, or set of information (How does this piece of work align to state standards?); to describe a situation (What trends do we see in the attendance data we have for various groups of students, e.g., girls, 11th-graders, special education students); or to address a challenge (How can professional development for literacy be offered during the school day, on a weekly basis?)

An object for analysis is presented.

This can be several items, a state standard, a piece of student work, a teacher assignment, the school weekly schedule, student-attendance data, or survey results. It can consist of anything that requires examination as part of a discussion.

Members become familiar with the object of discussion.

The item to be discussed may be provided to people before the meeting. It is also useful for time in the meeting to be designated for team members to examine an object (or practice) to prepare to discuss it thoughtfully, through a presentation, chance to read, completion of an assignment given to students, or a video viewing.

Members ask clarifying questions.

After the initial look, team members are given a chance to ask clarifying questions. These are questions concerning "matters of fact" that help people understand what they're looking at.

Members discuss the object presented in the context of the question, problem, or task posed.

Based on what has been presented, seen, or experienced, members share their thoughts. In discussions, it is essential that members place an emphasis is placed on the positives (things they liked) before speaking about things they'd change or question. The tendency to criticize, although quite natural, prevents colleagues from sharing their thoughts or their work. The discussion must be open and focused on the question or problem presented. At this time the presenter(s) are asked to be silent, perhaps even pushing away from the table or circle. This silence forces the presenter(s) to listen carefully and prevents the desire to defend or explain. At this point, participants should direct their comments to each other, *not* to the presenter(s). In fact, the group should talk as if the presenter(s) aren't there.

The presenter(s) reflect on the discussion.

After peers have an opportunity to converse, the presenter(s) have an opportunity to speak. During this time the rest of the group is silent. This doesn't have to be (and indeed shouldn't be) a response to the previous remarks, but a time to think aloud about the question or problem presented based on the information generated by the conversation. Once again, this is not a time to defend or explain, but a chance to struggle with the question or problem the presenter(s) brought to the table.

Members debrief the process.

The conversation concludes with a debrief of the process itself, so that future conversations may be improved or enhanced.

There are many ways for the SIT to develop collaborative learning among adults in the building. No matter how fostering adult learning and collaboration is accomplished, however, it is a necessary starting place if the school-improvement effort is to rise above more limited strategic planning processes and produce successful outcomes.

Obtaining Outside Assistance

Although many sites conduct school-improvement processes without external assistance, some have found it useful to have outside help. In some sites it has proven useful to bring in external coaches. The coach is someone familiar with school improvement who is selected by the school to assist the school in its self-study and who works closely with the SIT.

The coach helps the SIT develop a work plan and a timeline for meetings and deadlines and provides an important external perspective on the overall self-study as it progresses. Such assistance can also be provided by various reform support organizations such as (but not limited to) public education funds, regional education labs, universities, and education-focused nonprofits.

Using Standards of Practice

What do we mean by quality? How good is good? What do we want to change, and why? What will the school's practice look like if these changes are made?

In preparation for making strategic changes to a school, these definitions of quality must be explicit and shared publicly. In some instances these criteria, or *standards of practice*, will be predetermined and presented to the school for translation and analysis. In other instances, a school will have to identify criteria for itself.

Understand the Importance of Standards of Practice

During a school-improvement process, faculty, staff, and other *stakeholders* will be charting a course of action for school improvement. Through the self-study process, these team members will conclude what school practice looks like and what it ought to look like. Though staff may have worked with each other for a number of years, it is risky to assume that all agree on what good school practice looks like. With an increase in the diversity of perspectives and interests that exists in many communities, it is equally daring to assume that families, community members, or others may share a single view of what good school practice looks like. This image will be shaped by opinions that are either explicitly stated or implicit.

These opinions are often based on assumptions and perceptions about things such as:

- what the role of a teacher should be;
- what an "effective learning environment" should look like;

- how students best learn;
- what the role of a student's family members or caregivers should be in the school.

These silent, often unconsciously held opinions shape ideas about:

- how teachers should teach;
- what teachers need to know and be able to do to be effective;
- what the purpose of schooling is;
- what expectations for students should be;
- what general conclusions about school practice can be drawn.

These biases are natural and expected. Standards of practice won't change these views, but they do present a method for confronting biases. Although this process may seem like a waste of time, if your standards of practice are clear, transparent, and explicit, you have more concrete information to explain and act on your conclusions about the school. The presence of standards of practice can facilitate this.

Agreeing upon standards of practice and ways of measuring them through *performance indicators* can help the SIT make professional judgments about the quality of school practice.

Choose Focus Areas

To apply standards of practice in a self-study, the first task is to choose a set of *focus areas* in which to concentrate the inquiry. These focus areas are broad elements of school operation that cut across all areas of the school; that influence the effectiveness of teaching and learning; and that schools have some control over (HM Inspectors of Schools 1996).

Across the country, focus areas identified for and by schools vary. New York City has identified eight focus areas, which it calls "key elements" of exemplary schools,

as part of the Performance Assessment in Schools Systemwide (PASS) system. Those eight areas are:

- Comprehensive Education Plan Development
- School Climate
- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
- Staff Development
- Resources
- Parent Involvement
- Support Services
- School Self-Evaluation

These look quite different from Rhode Island's very broad focus areas that are a component of the state's School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) system. These focus areas are:

- Student Learning
- Teaching
- The School

And these differ even more from focus areas that were part of the San Diego City Schools Process for Accountability Review (PAR), which consist of three questions (for details of the PAR, see pages 72–87):

- Why is school performance the way it is?
- What is the whole picture? (Is there more to know about performance than the "first cut" indicates?)
- What is the school doing to enable students to make progress?

Adopt or Develop Standards of Practice

Standards of good practice should be decided upon for each focus area the school has chosen, and performance indicators should be identified to measure the progress toward each standard of practice. The standards of practice in each focus area should be chosen for their potential to create an environment for all children to achieve high standards.

Although each site's focus areas differ, applying standards of practice and choosing performance indicators to measure how well the school is achieving each standard should allow a closer look at the elements of an individual school relevant to the focus areas and at how these elements support student achievement.

Good standards of practice should: [3]

- Establish high standards. Each standard should create high expectations of practice for the school. This may require looking beyond what currently occurs to what is essential to help support effective teaching and learning.

- Emphasize what is important. Among the many recommendations for standards of practice within a focus area, standards should concentrate on the most essential aspects of best practice. This emphasis should "focus" the attention on practices that are hallmarks of a good school.

- Clearly and usefully articulate expectations. From reading each standard it should

be understandable what the school is expected to be able to do or exhibit. Moreover, standards should act as guides to direct improvement efforts. Though a school may not be able to pursue all of the standards at the same time, each standard presents a clear objective for practice.

- Reflect a broad consensus. Consensus is a conclusion reached in which no individual disagrees enough to block a decision. Such an agreement should be reached on the standards so that there is a common view of what is essential. This will require dialogue between multiple stakeholders.

- Present definitions and/or descriptions. Standards should be complemented by performance indicators which show what a particular practice or behavior looks

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[3] This description is based in part on the criteria for good content or performance standards stated by New Standards (New Standards 1997).

SOME IMPORTANT TERMS

- **Focus areas:** broad elements of school operation that influence the effectiveness of teaching and learning; and that schools have some control (e.g., mission and vision, professional development, etc.).

- **Standards of practice:** a model of good school practice to measure actual school practice against (e.g., effective instruction, equitable access and opportunity, etc.), chosen for each focus area. It is against these standards that a school or a visiting external team may assess school practice and policies to inform school improvement.

- **Performance indicators:** (sometimes referred to as *benchmarks*): Discrete descriptions of best practice that measure to what extent a standard of practice has been achieved. These indicators articulate what achievement of a standard of practice looks like, providing a concrete way to answer the question "How good is this school?" (Definition adapted from HM Inspectors of Schools 1996)

- **Rubric:** a scale that provides descriptions of performance in an area from strongest or most desired to weakest or unacceptable to guide the measurement of the performance indicators.

like. For example, what does a professional development plan that is informed by data on student learning needs generally look like? Each performance indicator may be accompanied by a *rubric* – a scale that concretely describes what different levels of performance look like.

There is a rich variety of models available of standards of practice, performance indicators, and rubrics that have been used around the country and discussed in recent research literature, within a variety of focus areas (e.g., professional development).

These models differ in their scope and approach; just as practitioners and researchers don't always agree on best practices (e.g., phonics versus whole language), policy-makers don't all agree on what will bring about academic success for all students. Different states and districts identify different focus areas. Sometimes only indicators are provided, and in other cases only standards are outlined. Some standards or indicators may ask for a single item to show you've achieved best practice in an area. Other standards or indicators are made up of several distinct parts that will require several kinds of data to demonstrate best practice.[4]

Examining different tools and choosing the most appropriate ones are important parts of any self-study cycle. For more information on available tools and models, see the sidebar Resources and Tools for School Improvement on this page.

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[4] In those sites in which the district or state requires a self-study as part of a school-improvement process, expectations also vary about when best practice must be demonstrated. Sometimes it is not expected in the first year of review, but rather three to five years after the initial (baseline) review. These expectations should be clarified as the school self-study cycle is begun.

Using Standards of Practice in Boston

As part of Boston's effort to bring about school improvement across the district, schools undergo an in-depth review every four years, based on the district's six focus areas (which they call "essentials for school improvement").

The table to the right shows how one of Boston's standards of practice (Effective Instruction) in the focus area on Learning and Using Best Teaching Practices is defined by specific performance indicators and measured by a four-level rubric.

Complete rubrics for the six "essentials" are presented in Part III, Rubrics and Standards of Practice, pages 62–71.

FOCUS AREAS

In Boston, schools and reviewers use six focus areas based on the district's "six essential" practices to achieve school improvement. The six areas encourage classroom practices that support high student achievement.

Boston's "Six Essentials":
  I. Schoolwide Instructional Focus
 II. Looking at Student Work and Data
III. Professional Development Plan
IV. *Learning and Using Best Teaching Practices*
 V. Aligning Resources with Instructional Focus
VI. Involvement of Parents and Community

STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

Standards of practice are criteria by which focus areas are judged. Looking at focus area IV: *Learning and Using Best Teaching Practices,* we see six standards.

Standards of practice for Focus Area IV:
Learning and Using Best Teaching Practices:
- *Effective Instruction*
- Academic Rigor
- Access and Opportunity
- High Standards
- Coherence
- Structure to Support Learning

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (OR BENCHMARKS)

Performance indicators constitute a best practice in a standard. The performance indicator of best teaching practice, *effective instruction,* is identified by the observation of two items.

Indicators of best practice in *effective instruction:*
- the presence and/or articulation of an empirically or conceptually strong theory of teaching
- use of a designated theory of teaching throughout the faculty

RUBRICS (LEVELS OF MEASUREMENT)

The presence or quality of a performance indicator may be assessed against a number of levels of performance. This may range from numerical rankings to a developmental scale adjusted over time. In Boston, each indicator can be assessed against four levels of attainment.

4 Demonstrating Effectiveness
3 Operational
2 Emerging
1 Readiness

ILLUSTRATIONS OF EACH LEVEL OF THE RUBRIC

Rubrics are often illustrated to indicate what good, average, or poor performance looks like for each performance indicator.

In Boston the rubrics describe each performance indicator at four levels. This is an illustration of a Level 4 and a Level 2 rating for each of the two performance indicators for *effective instruction*.

4: Effective instructional practices are modeled by the vast majority of the school staff.

2: Effective instructional practices are modeled by some of the staff and there is evidence that the school is working towards schoolwide implementation of effective practices.

4: There is an empirically or conceptually defensible theory of teaching and instructional practice that is clearly described and supports the school's academic goals for all students.

2: There is evidence that the school is working toward a theory of teaching and instructional practice that is clearly described and supports the school's academic goals.

Putting a Self-Study Cycle into Practice

A self-study, in which a school examines its own operation and performance by collecting and analyzing data, is driven by the overall question: "How good is our school?" Whoever is asking the question – students, teachers, parents, the business community, or the local board of education – wants to know how good the local schools are. A self-study provides an entry point to looking at how each aspect of school operation supports or improves teaching and learning. In this section we will outline how a school can answer the question of how good the school is through self-study.

The entire school community is involved in an effective effort to improve a school. It is the role of the school-improvement team, in coordination with the principal and senior staff, to delegate and negotiate staff involvement in the self-study process.

Focus areas, standards of practice, performance indicators, rubrics, and procedures for data collection and analysis will vary from school to school. Once these are in place, however, the basic tasks depicted in Figure 1 (A School Self-Study Cycle) are similar from one self-study process to another. This section describes these tasks in greater detail. To help you carry out these tasks, we have included a set of worksheets in Part II of *Inquiry and Action*, pages 43 to 59.

Identify Desired Student-Achievement Outcomes

All inquiries should be tied to student-achievement goals. Identify goals for student achievement relevant to the focus areas you have chosen.

In most sites, student-achievement goals are determined for the school by the district or the state. If not, set short- and long-term student-achievement goals that will act as measures of success of your school-improvement efforts.

Develop Essential Question(s)

Start this part of your self-study with *essential questions* about the school, brainstorming a list of issues you wonder about. For example, what do you want to know about how the budget is appropriated? How does your curriculum compare to the state's standards for learning? Be specific in your questions and concerns.

It is important that the essential questions be informed by your school's needs and relevant to the focus areas, standards of practice, and student-achievement goals chosen. You can have more than one question, but the more essential questions you pursue, the more people you will need to gather data in response to those questions. Be aware that if you have selected more than one inquiry question, you need to link them to appropriate focus areas and standards of practice for *each* of the questions.

After refining your question or questions, assign them to the focus areas and standards of practice to which they apply.

SCHOOL SELF-STUDY, TEACHER RESEARCH, AND CLASSROOM INQUIRY

The passion that drives many teachers' research initiatives or classroom inquiries is the desire to improve practice for the children they teach daily. In a school self-study this same passion has to be broadened to the entire school's practice in service of the entire student body. A school self-study differs from teacher research in that it doesn't attempt to learn about or identify any particular teacher. Although teacher research and classroom inquires are important parts of professional environments, the self-study must stay focused on the larger school inquiry strategy. For school self-studies, we want teachers' passions, skills, and questions to be directed toward the school's inquiry.

Note the essential question(s) you decide to use for your self-study on *Worksheet 1: Generating Your Essential Question(s)*.

Identify, Collect, and Organize Relevant Data

What data already exists in the building that can respond to your essential question(s)? Examples may include lesson plans, student work, test scores, attendance records, department budgets, teacher professional development plans, suspension rate statistics, etc. For each essential question being considered:

- State your hunches about what the answer may be.
- Identify data you think will support your hunch.
- Identify data that may challenge you hunch.
- Determine the additional data you need to collect to gain better insight.

Worksheet 2: Connecting Your Essential Question(s) to Data may be used for these tasks. Based on the data that may support or challenge your essential question, identify the types of data you have at your school. Based on your additional data needs, name the other types of data you will need to complement what already exists. For this task, you can use *Worksheet 3: Schoolwide Data Mapping*. Examples of types of data may include teacher opinions collected via interviews or surveys, student experiences and perspectives collected through student shadowing, or classroom practices used throughout the school as seen through peer observations. From your data mapping effort, develop a data-collection strategy that is manageable and possible within the time you have been allotted.

Data are pieces of information that will help you reach a conclusion about your school. Choo (1998) identifies five types of data (information) which may be useful:

WHAT IS AN ESSENTIAL QUESTION?

An essential question is the engine of an inquiry process. It is a question about crucial aspects of the school, as identified in the school's chosen focus areas that, if answered, will inform actions that can substantially close the gap between student-achievement goals and current student-achievement levels. Defining an essential question is not a perfect science, so it may require revision and alteration as you go.

Characteristics of a "good" essential question:
- It identifies an issue that relates directly or closely to improving teaching and learning.
- It identifies a topic that most stakeholders agree needs to be addressed.
- It can be used to direct an inquiry that includes data collection that will provide meaningful information for adjusting the work of the school.

Signs that the question is *not* an essential question:
- You already know the answer.
- You cannot relate the question to teaching and learning.
- Few stakeholders agree that the question needs to be investigated.
- It cannot direct an inquiry process.
- It cannot lead to data collection.
- Answering it has no implications on your school's practice or day-to-day operations.

For instance, a school in which the student population has shifted to include many students who are learning English might ask: Is our instruction currently successful or unsuccessful for English-language learners? The intent of the question may be double:
- to address the needs of English-language learners
- to initiate a process for addressing the specific needs of different populations of students

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- technical information: personal insights and experiences
- cognitive information: assumptions, beliefs, perceptions (hunches), and mental models
- symbols: facts, figures, records, and statistics

- physical objects/inputs: equipment, financial resources, human resources, models (such as reform models being used)
- rules: routines, policies, and operating procedures

Sources for the first two categories of data can be people in the school community such as teachers, staff, community members, parents, and students. Sources for the latter three categories – the more traditional forms of data – can be found in enrollment records, attendance records, transcripts, student work, standardized-test scores, guidance records, personnel evaluations, staff development activities, college entrance exam scores, and meeting agendas, to name a few. These types of data may reveal what and how students are doing, and what has or is being done to foster (or hinder) that achievement.

Organize the data in such a way that it reveals what's happening in your school. By *disaggregating* the data, or sorting data about a large group into meaningful subcategories, you can often uncover problems that have been hidden if data have always been averaged over the larger group. Categories that may be informative are:

- grade level
- department
- program participation (for students and/or teachers)
- gender
- race and ethnicity
- year data was collected (if existing data was collected over multiple years)
- home language or first language spoken
- years of attendance at school

TRENDS VS. CAUSALITY

To look for or identify trends is not to claim or seek causality (cause and effect). However, trends may reveal potential strategies for school improvement or raise deeper questions which themselves, when responded to with data, may indicate a direction for strategic action.

Analyze Data

Once the data is collected and organized, analyze the data, looking for information that answers your essential questions about the quality of practice within each of the focus areas you've chosen, and draw conclusions.

Acknowledge the potential and limitations of your information. Some data, due to collection method, may be less valid and reliable than other data. Be up-front about these shortcomings, but do not simply disregard certain sets of data due to perceptions of quality. You may record the above information on *Worksheet 4: Disaggregating the Data.*

Relate and compare multiple pieces of data to one another. See if they tell the same story. Look for trends. For example, what patterns seem to emerge when the data is looked at collectively? What do each of the departments appear to be spending funds on? How do student standardized-test scores compare to the quality of student work produced and teacher assignments given?

When making conclusions, remember that a conclusion is not a summary of the data, but a statement about your school – a response to your essential question(s) – based upon an analysis of the data. A conclusion may be written in a single sentence or in several sentences. Tom Wilson, principal investigator of Catalpa Ltd. and one of the crafters of Rhode Island's SALT Visit, recommends (RI Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education 1999c) that conclusions be no longer than three sentences and that, once written, a conclusion should be

- *explicitly stated and supported with evidence.* All conclusions should be reached as a result of data analysis. All sources of data used to reach a conclusion should be identified (e.g., classroom observations,

interviews, student work, etc.). Neither assumptions nor hearsay should be taken into consideration as evidence.

- *reached through a deliberative process with colleagues.* Collaboratively discuss trends and contradictions in the data, challenging conclusions when necessary. If the group cannot agree on a conclusion in light of the data present, consider not accepting the conclusion. If your team determines that you need additional information or support for a conclusion, document the conclusion citing data that supports and refutes it. The use of such a process based on valid and reliable data will add weight to the conclusions.

- *written with the intent of informing action by the school to improve teaching and learning.* The purpose of the self-study is to direct school improvement. This does not mean your conclusion should necessarily include a recommendation; most do not. Neither do conclusions target, applaud, or denigrate any individual in the school. Even disappointing conclusions should be presented positively in order to move the school forward. The way conclusions are presented influences how they are received.

- *punctuated by the professional judgment of those analyzing the data.* In a self-study the school community will determine how good school practice is through a review of qualitative and quantitative measures matched against standards for effective school operation. It will be the role of school staff to exercise their professional judgment to determine if what they have observed meets current expectations.

Worksheet 5: Drawing Conclusions may be used to document your conclusions as well as connect them to the data you've analyzed and actions that you'd like to propose.

Choose and Implement Actions

Once your school produces a set of conclusions in response to your essential question(s), it is the responsibility of the principal, the SIT, and the rest of the faculty and staff to review the conclusions and choose appropriate actions to improve school practice. Choosing appropriate actions is also part of the response if a school has received conclusions from an *external review team.* The actions taken by the school to improve student achievement are as important, if not more important, than the conclusions themselves. The efforts of the school to understand the conclusions and chart a course for action are crucial components of the school-improvement process.

Start by breaking down your conclusions. Going by focus area, outline both the *strengths* and the *areas in need of improvement* (or attention) cited by the school-improvement team. *Worksheet 6: Examining Self-Study Conclusions* may be used to aid with this task. (Note: the worksheet lists several focus areas, but you need focus only on the ones you chose to inquire about.)

Once conclusions have been broken down by focus area, the team is positioned to use the self-study conclusions to devise an action plan. After completing several months of investigation, it's important to remind each other of the student achievement goal(s) you set for yourselves. As you begin devising your action plan, restate those student learning goals – the desired outcomes for student achievement – you collectively identified. With those goals in mind, *identify actions within each focus area* to improve school practice.

The Four Quadrants for Action

Through our work in schools and school districts we have identified four quadrants for action. (See *Worksheet 7: Four Quadrants for Action* and Figure 2.)

I. HUMAN RESOURCE USE AND DEVELOPMENT

This quadrant concentrates on staff capacity, cooperation, organization, motivation, and management. Three components of staff work have substantial effects on instruction or school practice in this quadrant:

- skills of the faculty, staff, or administration to implement the appropriate/effective curriculum, instructional methods, or administrative practices (*how* staff work to promote student achievement)

- knowledge of effective teaching practices to reach a particular demographic within the student body; of how to build a collaborative school culture; of how to develop or sustain strong relationships with parents; etc. (*what* staff knows about effective practices)

- will and teacher expectations of students: the will to teach all children; the expectation that all children can achieve high standards; the motivation to change habits, beliefs, or behaviors to improve student achievement (*why* staff work to promote student achievement)

Skills: *How* staff promote student achievement

Knowledge: *What* staff knows about effective practice

Will and teacher expectations of students: *Why* staff work to promote student achievement

Partnerships: Use of community assets to increase a school's resources

Parent and community connections: Relationship with families and community members who are invested in student success

Human Resource Use and Development

Social Resources

School Organization

I

IV   II

III

Fiscal and Technical Resources

Systems and structures: Length of class periods, what is taught, etc.

Policies and rules: School characteristics that promote a rich learning environment

Culture (student and adult/professional): Teacher, student, and administrator values, attitudes, and general behavior

Money
Materials — Resources available and allocated to the achievement of core instructional needs
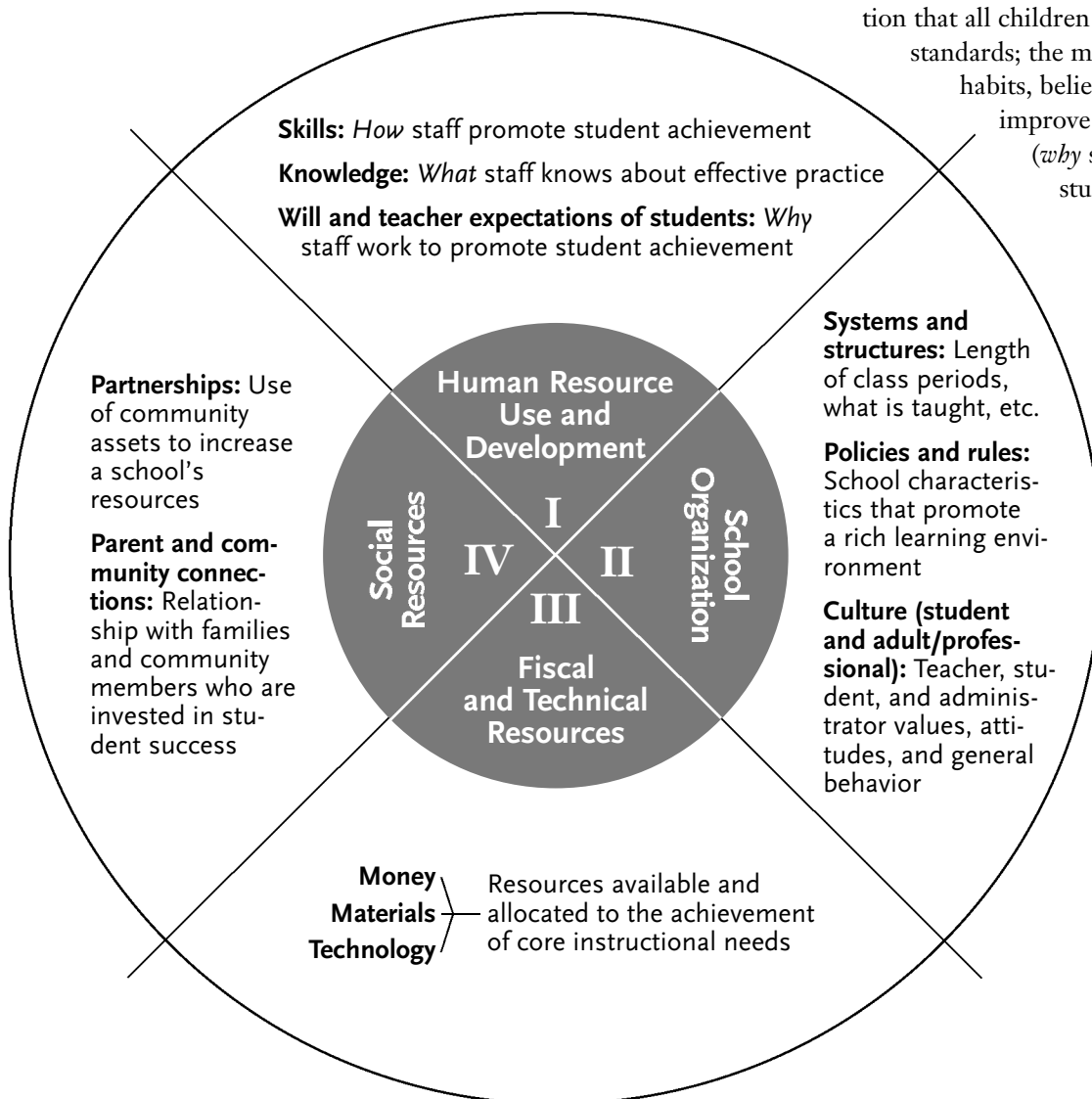**Technology**

Figure 2. Four quadrants for action

II. SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

This quadrant addresses internal organization and norms and contains three areas for possible action:

- systems and structures: how long class periods are, what is taught, etc.
- policies and rules: school characteristics that may produce positive behaviors or outcomes that facilitate a rich learning environment
- culture (student and adult/professional): attributes of the school culture such as teacher, student, and administrator values, attitudes, and general behavior; how adults work together in the building; etc.

III. FISCAL AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES

This quadrant is self-explanatory. It concerns the

- presence and use of financial and technological resources: the money, materials, and technology available and allocated to the achievement of core instructional needs

IV. SOCIAL RESOURCES

This quadrant concerns the development and use of relationships with other sources and organizations that can help improve student achievement, i.e.:

- partnerships: the school's relationship with stakeholders outside of the school building and its efforts to leverage community assets to increase its resources
- parent and community connections: the school's relationship with the families and community members who are invested in student success (e.g., religious leaders, community development organizers, former school board members, etc.)

ENSURING PARTICIPATION

Building an action plan should not fall to a small number of individuals. Restricting participation can prevent buy-in from colleagues, causing your team to miss a valuable opportunity to benefit from the knowledge and know-how of peers.

Similar to the self-study process, action planning should be delegated to the appropriate groups who have the expertise to inform and/or responsibility for the implementation of particular areas. For example, planning for improved math instruction should include math (and perhaps science) teachers.

This group should not work in isolation or without supervision, but should be asked to work collaboratively to craft a course of action informed by the data gathered and conclusions reached about instruction. Selecting the "best" course of action may require further data gathering and research on best practices and available resources.

Protocols may be used here to generate feedback on plans or to brainstorm on next steps.

Sharing Your Self-Study Conclusions and Action Plan

Sharing of self-study conclusions with stakeholders in the school community as well as the general public is something to consider and plan for as part of your school-improvement strategy. Stakeholders who may have an interest in self-study conclusions include:

- school board members and the superintendent
- the school site council
- faculty
- students
- parents
- the media
- funders and external partners

Each stakeholder has his or her own interests and motives for wanting to know the results of the study and may be reached

with a number of communication and public-engagement strategies. Even unflattering conclusions can be used by the school to its advantage to foster improvement rather than fuel hostility. Reporting the conclusions of your self-study represents a significant opportunity for you to communicate directly with parents, media, and the community at-large about how the school is performing. Below are suggestions for taking full advantage of that opportunity.

PLAN AHEAD AND BE PROACTIVE

Schools that make good use of the conclusions of a self-study do a lot of planning at the front end. What is the key message? Who should get summaries of the conclusions? How will they be disseminated? How will feedback from the public be collected? These are key questions to be addressed. Communications planning should begin early in the self-study process and should focus on developing relationships. Work to build healthy relationships with your community, the families of students, and (in smaller communities) media contacts so that

when it is time to disseminate information, the task is more manageable. Don't wait until the tail end of the process, when you're left to figure out how best to "spin" the results.

MAKE REPORTS EASY TO READ: SHORTER IS BETTER

Be careful not to overload people with too much information. We suggest an "onion peel" approach of providing all audiences with a brief, easy-to-understand summary of the conclusions of your self-study, with more detailed information available for those who want it.

INVEST IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

People are more likely to read a report that's attractive and well organized, with clear headlines. This kind of reporting does not have to be expensive. Use readily available clip art instead of fancy graphics or photographs. People also like the use of color, although we suggest that those on a limited budget would be better off to put money into design and writing rather than color printing.

MAKE THE CONCLUSIONS MEANINGFUL

Understand that while people want performance data, in raw form it is often meaningless to families and the larger community. We suggest reporting self-study conclusions within a broader context. In this era of the bottom line, most people direct their attention exclusively to outcome measures, such as test scores. A strength of the school-improvement process is its ability to make schools more transparent. Consider using this transparency to create a better understanding of what schools can do to help children achieve high standards and what your particular school has done and is doing. Also connect your self-study conclusions to bread-and-butter issues that people care about such as safety, discipline, and achievement. Help the reader make the link between things they care about and the operations within a school that foster those things.

RESOURCES TO PREPARE FOR EXTERNAL REVIEWS

- Some states, districts, and accrediting organizations require a review by a team external to the school as part of the school-improvement process. A school might also want to invite an external team to serve as critical friends, even if it is not required. For more information about what a school needs to do to prepare for an external visit, see Appendix C: Preparing to Host an External Review.

- Appendix B: Creating a School Portfolio can also be useful when an external review is planned.

- Appendix D: School Inquiry Process Map outlines tasks to address in an integrated school-improvement process that can include a self-study, an external review, or both.

BE CANDID: PRESENT THE GOOD AND THE BAD

The public will want to know how good the school is and what school personnel are going to do to improve performance. This should be the central point of your reporting. In a short summary, identify your strengths and successes, your challenges and shortcomings, and your immediate next steps. The last piece will be particularly important if your self-study yields conclusions that are less than glowing. Presently, there is an overall lack of confidence in and a general frustration with public schools, particularly in urban areas. If a portion of a school's operation is unsatisfactory, schools will have to explain what they're going to do to make improvements.

USE CREDIBLE AND MULTIPLE MESSENGERS

Many schools and districts assume that simply preparing a report, sending it home in "backpack mail" and getting information into the local newspaper is sufficient. Research on school report cards found that although most states and districts publish such reports, large majorities of parents and taxpayers have never seen one. Indeed, half the educators interviewed said they had never seen a school report card.

We strongly urge administrators to ensure that their front-line communicators, teachers, are familiar with the contents of self-study conclusions and are prepared to discuss them with parents and others in the community. Research and common sense suggest that teachers are the most credible sources of information for parents (Education Commission of the States 1996). Teachers who aren't part of the SIT are often left out of the information loop. Preparing all of your teachers to discuss self-study conclusions will likely require some communications training, but it may be the most cost-effective communications investment a school can make.

GETTING INFORMATION TO PARENTS

Based on conclusions about school report cards, we suggest that schools use multiple messengers to spread the word about school performance. A priority for all schools should be getting information into the hands of families.

Sending self-study conclusions home with students or expecting parents to pick them up at school meetings is not enough. Approaches to consider are: direct home mailings, making conclusions available at a wide range of locations in the community (banks, hardware stores, community centers, supermarkets, etc.), presenting the information at meetings at schools and elsewhere, and making information available on the Internet.

Evaluate Impact on Practice and Outcomes

To complete the self-study process and make it into a cycle, plan when and how to evaluate the impact of your actions on school practice and student outcomes. You should plan to examine, at regular intervals, whether school practice has really changed and whether student achievement has really improved. This will take you back to the beginning of a new cycle – revisiting your original student-achievement goals, establishing new student-achievement goals, and developing new essential questions, based on learning from the previous cycle.

As part of the evaluation process, it may be useful to prepare a *school portfolio* – a collection of *artifacts* or work that document school practices and that can provide a baseline for evaluation (See Appendix B: Creating a School Portfolio). As evidence is added, the portfolio can also demonstrate growth over time of a school community. It can be shared both internally and with an external audience.