

Overview of Services and Supports to Districts and Schools

The Education Alliance has developed an array of tools and resources to facilitate districts' consideration of new structures, policies and practices centered on improving teaching and learning. Based on our experience and research, we know that districts that have cohesive and aligned processes and strategies focused on improving teacher practice are best able to make and sustain improvements over time – not just in one classroom or in one school, but across the entire district community. Our work with districts is designed to build district capacity and support the effective management of school improvement processes. We recognize that it is the district office that can most effectively refine and enrich their schools' improvement efforts to better catalyze, support, and enable substantive improvement.

With this in mind, we have developed and successfully used a portfolio of strategic and systemic development tools that inform school improvement efforts within and throughout a district. Embedded in each of our supports and tools is an explicit focus on equity, closing the achievement gap, and identifying ways to better meet the needs of students who are not performing as well as is desired.

Our tools and processes include:

District Organizational Assessment

A collaborative organizational assessment of the district's structures, programs, and practices that support (and/or inhibit) effective school improvement throughout the system, leading to a set of jointly determined recommendations and actions intended to improve the coherence of district improvement strategies.

Strategic Mapping Process

A strategic mapping process for aligning and mapping out how the district accesses (from state and federal sources) and targets (across the district and to specific schools and teachers) programs, resources, and practices to address school- and classroom-based issues. Through this process, district leaders develop a cohesive and aligned district-wide strategy for supporting underperforming schools.

Strategic Problem Solving Process

A school-based strategic problem solving process designed to enhance school-level instructional program coherence. Initially designed to be used in schools with emerging or existing ELL populations, this process can be used with schools that have a diverse student population that may require differentiated instructional programs or strategies. The process involves taking school leaders through a careful and strategic consideration of how best to align and adapt new and existing school improvement efforts to attend to the needs of all students.

Targeted Services to Districts and Schools

Targeted technical assistance and professional development, focused on issues such as ELL instructional strategies, providing school improvement workshops, evaluation consultation, and facilitating the development of cross-school professional learning communities.

These supports can be offered in tandem as a comprehensive approach to district improvement (e.g., in a district identified for corrective action) or they can be applied separately depending on the targeted needs of the district so as to align with your state's support strategies and initiatives. We are offering to provide direct, onsite technical assistance to districts in the use of each or all of the above described tools and processes.

While we see a great deal of our time being spent directly serving the needs of those districts recommended by the state education agency, we also seek to partner *with* state education agency leaders in identifying and capitalizing on those state-level resources and strategies which can help guide the district's improvement efforts.

Effective and Inclusive Strategies for District Improvement

Strategy #1: District Organizational Assessment

PURPOSE

The *Organizational Assessment* provides districts with an external and research-based review and examination of district structures, programs, and practices supporting and inhibiting effective district and school improvement efforts. Through a formative examination of how the district is organized to support teaching and learning, we work collaboratively with district officials and jointly determine recommendations and actions intended to improve the coherence of district improvement strategies and its ability to improve instructional practice among all teachers within and across schools. The organizational assessment is customizable and can attend to specific instructional issues or specific student populations depending on the particular needs and context of the district.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The *Organizational Assessment* involves interviews with targeted district staff, focus groups and/or interviews with principals and other relevant school staff, a review of district documents related to school improvement practices, and an analysis of contextual issues impacting the district's efforts. Education Alliance staff will also review pertinent State Education Agency (SEA) regulations, policy, and frameworks that influence district's school improvement efforts. After our initial analysis, The Education Alliance provides district leaders with a set of findings regarding the district's strengths and areas of concern regarding school improvement efforts, as seen from the various perspectives of interviewees and the document review. This initial analysis serves as a starting point from which The Education Alliance staff can then "walk" district leaders through a process of *collaborative inquiry and analysis*, where district leadership considers specific actions to improve their district-wide system of support for school improvement.

The *Organizational Assessment* service involves a flexible and collaborative four-step process:

1 Document Review

Initial fact-finding and information gathering regarding how the district is organized to provide support to underperforming schools, including information on the district's school improvement strategies and its ability to address specific challenges facing schools.

2 Exploration of Internal Coherence

In-depth analysis of existing district supports, policies and processes for school improvement and the specific challenges facing schools (e.g., improving instructional quality, attending to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students) through interviews and focus groups with district and targeted school staff.

3 Feedback and Review

Facilitated review sessions for key district and school leaders to review and discuss implications of the *Organization Assessment* and associated findings related to specific challenges facing the district's schools.

4 Potential Next Steps/Outcomes

Determined on a district-by-district basis.

TIMELINE

Staff from The Education Alliance visits the district approximately 4-6 times over the course of a 3-7 month period. Each visit is approximately two days in length.

OUTCOMES

The district receives a **detailed report** summarizing the findings of the *Organizational Assessment*, a description of the district's collaborative inquiry and analysis process, and a list of recommendations and potential next steps.

District leaders are trained in **formative evaluation strategies** that can be used to inform their continual assessment of district and school improvement strategies.

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Strategy #2: Strategic Mapping Process

PURPOSE

The *Strategic Mapping Process* is designed to assist district leaders collectively consider and “map-out” the different strategies and resources used to support underperforming schools. Through a mapping of the process and content of district improvement strategies, district leaders are able to craft and articulate a cohesive and integrated set of district intervention strategies and resources for improving teaching and learning within and across schools that is targeted towards schools’ specific needs and challenges.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The *Strategic Mapping Process* is a collaborative approach through which Education Alliance staff engage district staff in a series of intensive half- and full-day mapping sessions. During the strategic mapping sessions, district (and sometimes school) leaders visually and graphically identify and articulate the specific issues and challenges facing schools in their district and the district’s existing school improvement strategies, interventions, and resources supporting schools facing these issues and challenges. Finally, district staff collectively consider how their school improvement strategies, interventions, and use of resources could be more effectively integrated, or revised, in order to better meet the school improvement needs of their particular schools.

The *Strategic Mapping Process* involves five steps:

- 1 Developing a district **Scenario** that describes the contextual information within which the district’s (or individual school’s) specific needs and challenges are situated.
- 2 Articulating district- and school-level **Issues and Challenges** influencing student performance.
- 3 Identifying and explaining existing and potential **Interventions and Resources** that address district- and school-level issues and challenges.
- 4 **Integration** considers how existing, or new strategies, and resources could be more cohesively and effectively integrated to serve the specific needs of schools identified for improvement
- 5 **System Impact** maps out the various policies and external issues influencing the state’s capacity to provide coordinated support and recommends ways to address those issues.

TIMELINE

Staff from The Education Alliance visits the district approximately three to six times over the course of one to three months. Each visit is comprised of a half- or full-day meeting with central office staff in order to engage in the collaborative strategic mapping process as outlined above.

OUTCOMES

District leaders develop a detailed **process map** displaying how district improvement strategies are intended to influence teaching and learning and how different individuals and offices across the district and in schools influence each other.

District leaders develop a **content and policy map** that displays and articulates the content of particular improvement strategies and the policies and resources (federal, state, and local) that influence the implementation and effectiveness of those improvement strategies.

A written **summative report** captures the findings and experience of the district and provides tangible recommendations for district planning and the implementation of strategies targeting underperforming schools.

Effective and Inclusive Strategies for District Improvement

Strategy #3: Strategic Problem Solving for School Improvement

PURPOSE

Strategic Problem-Solving for School Improvement is a tool and a process designed to assist school leaders in identifying and aligning targeted school improvement strategies into a coherent and strategic plan for school improvement. By engaging in a facilitated and research-based planning process, school leaders acquire the knowledge and skills needed to effectively integrate new and existing strategies and program components so as to decrease the 'noise' and incoherent 'reform by addition' approach to school improvement that is characteristic of many underperforming schools.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

Strategic Problem-Solving for School Improvement is a school-based planning process in which school leaders (administrators and teachers) analyze the inclusion and/or integration of new or existing school improvement strategies and initiatives (e.g., school-wide initiatives, content specific initiatives, and targeted interventions) with current instructional or school-based programs to ensure a cohesive and integrated implementation of strategies and use of resources. The process is designed to supplement a school or district's existing planning process so as to ensure that planning efforts are meaningful and efficiently managed.

Facilitated by experienced Education Alliance professionals, school leaders engage in a collaborative and data based analysis of their school improvement strategies and initiatives in relationship to the needs of their specific student body, the socio-cultural context of their school, and the instructional programs already in place at the school. The strategic problem-solving process empowers the school to "step back" and re-examine its new and existing efforts for school improvement and how these efforts attend to the targeted needs of the school and its student population (e.g., for English language learners or for students with disabilities) and to assess whether new efforts are being "layered" onto already existing strategies and programs in the school in ways that create confusion or fragmentation, or dilute the school's mission and goals. The facilitated support provided by Education Alliance staff involves the following stages and activities, which are also described in an accompanying guidebook available for download.

Strategic Problem-Solving Process

Stage One: Problem Diagnoses: Conducting a Needs Assessment

Stage Two: Aligning Strategies to Meet the Needs of All Students

Stage Three: Strategic Alignment – Building Program Coherence

Tools for Developing an Aligned and Coherent Approach to School Improvement

Activity #1: Inventory of Current Academic and Non-Academic Programs

Activity #2: Impact of Proposed Improvement Strategy on Current Programs

Activity #3: Assessing Impact of Improvement Strategy on School Structures, Culture and Resources

Activity #4: Taking Action to Develop Program Coherence

TIMELINE

Staff from The Education Alliance work and visit the district/school over the course of a school year, beginning with an intensive (1 to 2 days) visit in December/January followed by three half day planning meetings in February-April to finalize school improvement plans.

OUTCOME

School leaders develop a **detailed inventory of all school improvement strategies** and determine how each strategy addresses specific goals and aligns with other school improvement strategies.

School leaders **develop the capacity and know-how needed to align and implement school improvement strategies** and instructional programs in a meaningful, inclusive and effective manner that is focused on improving instructional quality and improving students' academic achievement.

Effective and Inclusive Strategies for District Improvement

Strategy #4: Targeted Services to Underperforming Districts and Schools

PURPOSE & OVERVIEW

The Education Alliance works with states, districts and schools to build leadership capacity and support the development of high-performing and inclusive districts and schools. Our work with districts is designed to build district capacity and support the effective management of school improvement processes.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Our approach to district and school improvement is guided by the following principles:

- We incorporate an equity lens as a guide and frame for all of our work.
- We recognize that a systems-based approach to district and school improvement is optimal for ongoing and sustainable improvements in teaching and learning.
- Jointly engaging with district and school leaders and staff is essential to supporting sustainable improvements in teaching and learning.
- We work to align research findings and federal and state policy with the contingencies of local contexts.
- We offer flexible and differentiated services.

With these principles providing the basis for our work, we have developed and offer a selection of technical assistance and professional development services to meet the varied needs of districts and schools. The technical assistance and professional development services listed below supplement the broader district interventions (Organizational Assessment, Strategic Mapping, and Strategic Problem Solving) that are available to districts as part of The Education Alliance's strategies and supports for underperforming districts.

TARGETED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Secondary School Redesign

Consultation and training for high schools engaged in high school reform (e.g., smaller learning communities).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Ongoing workshops for teachers and administrators on the use of culturally relevant and appropriate instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Instructional Strategies for English language learners (ELLs)

Professional development for teachers on the use of research-based and appropriate instructional strategies for ELLs.

Effective Planning for School Improvement

Two-day workshops to assist school leadership teams identify and select appropriate research-based instructional strategies and whole-school improvement strategies.

Evaluation Consultation

Training and support designed to assist state and district leaders develop meaningful and accurate measures and processes to assess the impact of selected improvement strategies or of broader state- or district-wide support strategies.