Leading School Improvement With *In*tension™

By Danette Parsley, Jacqueline Raphael, and Mike Siebersma

Popular rhetoric in education often makes a compelling case for the simplicity of leading schools to improved student outcomes. Leaders are regularly called upon to *get the right people on the bus, develop a shared vision, engage families,* and *execute your strategy.* In this view there is a set of right answers that are easily known and acted upon. In reality, school leadership is complex and requires wisdom, informed judgment, and choosing among multiple options—sometimes multiple good options and sometimes only bad ones. Should leaders push for fast results or incremental improvements over time? Do they focus on closing the achievement gap or raising the rigor of teaching and learning? There is no single right solution to these challenges. In fact, there are often multiple paths to achieving success. As such, those leading change efforts often find themselves reaching difficult decision points as they plan and implement improvement initiatives.

At Education Northwest we believe the path to success involves rejecting "either/or" thinking in favor of a "both/and" mind-set—leading with what we call *"In*tension." We find that school leaders who intentionally manage opposing viewpoints and find optimal ground for making and implementing choices in the change process maximize their chances for success. In our nearly 50 years of supporting school improvement work, we have helped school leaders learn how to lead with *In*tension to achieve results. In this brief, we share lessons learned from our field experience.

> ***In*tension™** (n): (**in**-ten-sh*uh*n) the intentional act of balancing tensions, or seemingly opposing approaches, to optimize desired results in complex situations

Lessons Learned About Leading School Improvement With *In*tension

1. Use a rapid *and* sustainable approach to school change.
2. Maintain a schoolwide focus *and* target individual student needs.
3. Leverage mandated initiatives *and* focus on context-driven strategies to address specific school needs.
4. Develop strong administrative leadership *and* create conditions for collective leadership.
5. Continuously refine current practices *and* search for new evidence-based practices.

Lesson #1

Use a rapid *and* sustainable approach to school change.

Although most school leaders agree on the critical importance of continuous school improvement, there's less agreement on how to make it a reality. School turnaround models, for example, emphasize implementation of dramatic changes that lead to gains within short time frames (often called "quick wins"). Other more traditional models of school improvement emphasize system-wide changes that produce gradual, ongoing improvement with the goal of building local capacity for change

over time. But, do schools need to choose one approach and outcome over the other? We think not. Our experience tells us that powerful change most often results from a simultaneous focus on achieving tangible "quick wins" that build systemic capacity for change incrementally over a longer period of time.

To achieve rapid *and* sustainable improvements requires engaging in shorter term change cycles that are repeated several times throughout a school year. Schools identify a year-long schoolwide need for improvement, such as increased math performance. They then break this goal down into smaller, more manageable, data-informed improvement efforts, such as increasing proportional reasoning or exhibiting perseverance when solving difficult problems. These Rapid Inquiry-Driven Change Cycles™ (RICCs) are undertaken one at a time in 10- to 12-week periods and accumulate to produce desired results throughout a school year to meet annual goals. For example, a specific RICC goal might be, "By the end of 12 weeks, 90 percent of students will be able to accurately draw a diagram when solving a grade-appropriate proportional reasoning problem." To increase the likelihood of sustaining results and building system capacity for change over the long run, schools also identify and address a small number of system conditions that are likely to either help or hinder targeted improvements. Over time, schools see tangible improvements in teaching and learning while increasing their capacity to continuously improve by strengthening their overall system.

Systematic use of an iterative, data-informed change cycle can spur schoolwide transformation. One rural high school in Oregon used this process to tackle adolescent literacy and get a jump-start on implementing Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts and literacy. School leaders, including teachers, used readily available data to set a schoolwide focus on helping students accurately identify the main idea of a complex informational text and describe how that idea is developed through examples and supporting details. Teachers administered a preassessment to determine their students' baseline proficiency and then used the results to set a measurable and manageable student achievement goal of improved comprehension of complex informational texts. Next, staff reviewed several research-based instructional solutions that could be used to address this learning challenge and decided to provide explicit instruction in comprehension strategies using graphic organizers. "Because our teachers had experimented with graphic organizers in the past and knew more could be done with them, this appeared to us to be the instructional solution most likely to succeed at our school," explained the school's instructional coach.

After reaching consensus on this instructional solution, the leadership team identified two school conditions that needed to be strengthened in order for their instructional change effort to be successful. These were identifying sample informational texts to use with students and providing targeted professional development for teachers. Addressing these conditions helped teachers—particularly core-subject teachers—quickly ramp up their ability to provide explicit instruction in comprehension using graphic organizers.

Armed with a solid plan for change, all teachers, including physical education and music teachers, collaborated to implement this approach schoolwide. They identified a set of grade-appropriate informational texts and collaborated on effective modeling and scaffolding. Throughout the 12-week change cycle, they refined their instructional approach using real-time, relevant data and student work. At the end of the change cycle, the school reported an 18.5 percent gain in the number of students able to identify the main idea in an informational text and explain its development.

Supported by Education Northwest technical assistance providers, this school did more than achieve an instructional quick win. School leaders planned and pursued a series of several schoolwide change cycles throughout the year, each building directly on the previous quick win. This systematic planning and implementation served as a powerful motivator for teachers to achieve success in each cycle. Additionally, school leaders focused throughout the year on building sustainable capacity for change at their building. They reviewed, targeted, and addressed the systemic factors they knew would influence the school's ability to improve student outcomes. These included putting into place a strong communication and feedback loop so that staff received consistent messages about the change effort and ensuring that teacher team time would be devoted to working toward the school reading comprehension goal.

Lesson #2
Maintain a schoolwide focus *and* target individual student needs.

Schools that consistently succeed in ambitious change efforts set and carefully monitor progress toward achieving a small number of meaningful, high-impact goals each year. Selecting common goals and maintaining a schoolwide focus for improvement efforts can be problematic, however, if school leaders do not also attend to establishing structures

and processes to address the needs of students who are struggling.

For this reason, schools leading with *In*tension often shoot for more than an *average* gain in the area of focus: They specify goals for *all* students, particularly low-performing ones. They also establish and use a comprehensive assessment system—one that includes outcome, interim, universal screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring tools—to track all students' gains over the course of the year. Using ongoing assessment helps teachers monitor and adjust core instruction for all students while providing the information needed to intervene with small groups or individual struggling students. Addressing individual student needs while focusing on a common goal deepens the impact of improvement efforts.

For example, the leadership team at an Oregon elementary school with a high proportion of English language learner students set a focus on math vocabulary. When teachers met together to review the pretest results, they found that a significant percentage of their students scored lower than anticipated. Rather than reduce the percentage gain they would work to achieve, school leaders helped to reframe expectations: On average, students would demonstrate a 20 percent gain in the accurate use of mathematics vocabulary appropriate for their grade level, and all students would show a gain of at least 5 percent. Thus the goal highlighted the need to ensure that every student contributed to the school's success. It also led to regular monitoring of student progress and a set of interventions for struggling students.

Lesson #3: Leverage mandated initiatives *and* focus on context-driven strategies to address specific school needs.

We often hear educators struggling with the decision of where to most effectively direct their time and energy. Should they focus on implementing district/state-level initiatives well or on identifying and implementing locally identified changes to address their specific school needs? Sometimes school improvement initiatives, such as implementing more rigorous standards or teacher evaluation systems, can seem like ends in and of themselves rather than means to better address student needs. When that happens, teachers feel stressed by seemingly disparate efforts that detract from, rather than support, day-to-day efforts in their classrooms.

But any initiative—whether it is designed locally or at the district or state level—represents a set of solutions that are intended to improve student outcomes. The key is to align top-down initiatives and bottom-up solutions in a way that creates one focused effort designed to meet the specific needs of your school. School leaders who effectively manage this tension find ways to maintain a focus on improving outcomes for their students by designing context-appropriate solutions for their specific challenges that incorporate and are informed by district- and state-level initiatives.

For example, the leadership team for the rural Oregon high school in lesson #1 identified reading comprehension as the most pressing challenge facing their students. They used the CCSS to help narrow their specific focus and instructional solution. They also developed a set of common indicators for instructional practice that could be built into their new teacher evaluation system. In the end they helped students grow in
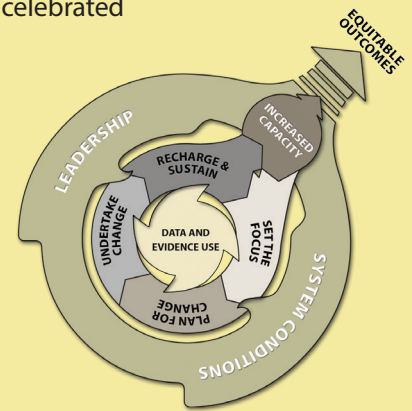
areas they identified as critical while learning from their efforts to implement a portion of the new standards and new educator effectiveness requirements—two high-priority district and state initiatives.

Lesson #4: Develop strong administrative leadership *and* create conditions for collective leadership.

Many school improvement models and some school turnaround literature strongly emphasize the role of principal as THE leader in a

school. Nonetheless, savvy principals know simply from the demands of their role and the strengths they see in their staff that there are others in their schools who can share leadership responsibilities. This can create a tension between strong administrative leadership and collective or shared leadership: another practice supported by research and theory. According to Louis and colleagues (2010), collective forms of leadership have a stronger influence on student achievement than does individual leadership. But fostering collective leadership requires strong leaders who create the right conditions in their buildings.

When schools successfully manage this tension, "school leadership" becomes inclusive of all stakeholders who are willing to share influence, responsibility, and accountability for achieving school goals and creating the conditions that support positive school change. Principals often wonder about the implications for their positional authority. However, creating a shared leadership culture does not minimize the principal's position or authority; on the contrary, often principals report that it helps them become better leaders and build a stronger collective force in the school.

To help unleash collective leadership capacity, administrators take a variety of actions and demonstrate a set of values and expectations that pave the way for all staff members to exercise their influence beyond the realm of their own classrooms. For example, they can:

- Model leadership for others
- Ask strong teacher leaders who are respected by their colleagues to help model and encourage schoolwide leadership
- Attend carefully to open and ongoing communication throughout the building

- Provide time for and sit in on collaborative team meetings
- Convey a compelling need for change and that shared leadership is critical to success
- Provide encouragement and recognize individual teacher successes, emphasizing that individuals make up the whole
- Establish a school leadership team that can provide both a model and foundation for engaging additional staff members in schoolwide improvement
- Encourage teachers to take on formal leadership roles and responsibilities based on their unique strengths and interests (e.g., share instructional or content expertise, collect and organize data, record and distribute notes, chair committees or departments, present at faculty meetings, champion change initiatives)
- Promote more informal, emergent opportunities for teachers to take responsibility for change (e.g., offer additional tutoring, create after-school clubs, champion change efforts, actively participate in or lead committees, constructively share opinions or raise issues for the whole staff to consider)

This type of leadership increases teachers' sense of inclusion and ownership, leading to enhanced job satisfaction and engagement. They also develop the capacity to move fluidly between classroom and whole-school perspectives, as one elementary teacher explained:

This experience has changed me as a person. I mean, I am a different person now than I was three years ago. I'm even more invested in my school and my kids and the kids as a whole. … I always cared about all the kids, but I really only focused on my 22. And now what's going to work best in third grade is important to me, too. And

therefore what the third grade teachers are doing is important to me. So, it has given me a much broader vision of the school, of our goals as a whole, and then my role in it.

Leadership should not be seen as a zero-sum concept; any stakeholder can have an increased level of influence without diminishing the influence of others. Strong administrators take the initiative to create systems that are rich in shared leadership.

Lesson #5
Continuously refine current practices *and* search for new evidence-based practices.

Effective school leaders know that improvement does not occur apart from change. They continually monitor the practices in their schools for effectiveness in improving student outcomes and seek new evidence-based practices, considering what needs to change next to move the school forward. Leaders may be tempted to ditch current practices in search of new ones when improvement strategies and instructional practices are not yielding expected increases in student learning. The tension is that if staff members keep doing what they have been doing, failure seems inevitable but abandoning practices in which the school has invested significant resources (e.g., time, money, energy) equates to admitting defeat. Neither choice is the right answer—at least not all of the time.

To lead with *In*tension, leaders must constantly assess the actions taken in their schools against the best of what research has shown to be successful. They must conduct deeper diagnosis where gaps are noted, asking questions such as:

- Is the selected practice clearly aligned to student learning challenges and goals?
- Does local context demand a difference between observed and prescribed practice?
- Can minor tweaks to current practice bring it in line with research-based guidance?
- What can others learn from teachers who are having the most success with the practices?
- How can research guide decisions about adapting the practices to be more effective?

Pursuing questions such as these provides important information in deciding whether existing practice must be replaced by something altogether new or can be altered to meet student needs.

Often schools can get out of a rut by taking mindful action to shift practices that are already in place. At other times, they must work actively to replace existing practices with different ones that are supported by research and better aligned to their students' needs. Leaders can use various data to make the case for needed shifts and to paint a picture of what improved practice will look like. They must then provide opportunities for teachers to learn about the changes in practice, receive feedback, and reflect on their efforts.

When this tension is not managed effectively, leaders run the risk of "throwing the baby out with the bath water" (i.e., giving up on aspects of potentially high-leverage practices that need only minor shifts to meet students' needs). Conversely, they might perpetuate ineffective practices while ignoring better alternatives. When schools are led with *In*tension, leaders see the range of options between perpetuating ineffective practices and wholesale abandonment and replacement of those practices.

Conclusion

Schools are complex human systems. Each is shaped by a unique set of values, views, and actions. When making decisions, school leaders must consider the needs and advice of many different players—students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, community members, district and state administrators—who have a big stake in the success of the school. This creates a rich and dynamic environment full of possibility. But, it also presents numerous tensions, some of which we describe here. School leaders first must recognize and embrace the inherent tensions in school improvement, then—in real time—create conditions for success. Often, when faced with one or more seemingly opposite approaches to achieving desired results, leaders make the mistake of examining the situation from an either/or perspective and rushing to adopt simple solutions. Conversely, they can experience paralysis and inaction, which is as destructive as misguided action. The goal of actively leading with *In*tension is to recognize and embrace the unavoidable tensions that emerge in complex situations and use them to find the optimal course to achieve significant goals.

Reference

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About the authors

Danette Parsley (Danette.Parsley@ educationnorthwest.org) serves as Education Northwest's chief program officer, as well as the director of the Center for Strengthening Education Systems. She has extensive experience providing professional development and technical assistance and developing products and tools to assist schools, districts, and states engage in continuous improvement.

Jacqueline Raphael (Jacqueline. Raphael@educationnorthwest. org), a senior program advisor at Education Northwest, has extensive experience developing, delivering, and writing about school improvement and professional development for practitioners and policymakers.

Mike Siebersma (Mike.Siebersma@educationnorthwest.org) directs the Northwest Comprehensive Center, one of 15 federally funded national programs that builds the capacity of state education agency staff in school improvement, educator evaluation, standards implementation, and supporting improved education for American Indian/ Alaska Native students.