HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS

This report is the second in a series of five publications focused on the Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA) of 2006. The series draws on data from an ongoing, independent evaluation of QEIA funded by the California Teachers Association (CTA). Following up on the first report, which was focused on an in-depth examination of QEIA in participating schools, this second report focuses specifically on stakeholders in 10 exemplary schools and their experiences with school improvement. This report addresses the following three research questions:

1. What incidents and experiences led to success at exemplary schools?
2. What features of school sites help to mitigate challenges?
3. How might lessons learned be transferred to other schools while accounting for unique local contexts?

ABOUT THE SCHOOLS

The sample was comprised of seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school in 10 school districts. Exemplary schools were selected to represent the range of QEIA schools across the state in terms of school type, district size, geographic location, and population type (e.g., rural/small town, large city, mid-size city, etc.).

In California, schools receive a state decile ranking; by 2012, the exemplary schools had improved their state ranking by at least two deciles. Schools also receive a similar schools decile ranking; this ranking shows where schools rank on a scale of 1 to 10 compared to 100 schools of similar characteristics. Exemplary schools improved their similar schools ranking by at least three deciles.
PATHWAYS TO CHANGE

As part of this study, principals – in interviews, and teachers – in open-ended questionnaires, were asked about key pathways that led to school improvement. A variation of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT)¹ was used to generate reports of key events and/or experiences resulting in school improvement.

From principals and teachers, 174 incidents were initially identified. Thirty-nine accounts were removed during content analysis because they did not contain a specific incident (i.e., were too general), did not address the questions, were ambiguous, or were uncommon (i.e., mentioned by too few respondents). The remaining 135 incidents were categorized. Seven categories of incidents emerged from the analysis.

Reducing Class Size

As a key pathway, CSR opened the door to instructional opportunities that would not exist otherwise. Respondents commonly noted that CSR paved the way for the following changes in instruction: 1) More small group instruction; 2) Differentiated instruction; 3) Individual time with each student; 4) Instruction geared toward developing more complex skills; 5) Expanded time for re-teaching; and 6) Frequent and ongoing assessment.

Leveraging Collaboration Time

Collaboration served as a gateway to change in every exemplary school; collaboration led to three promising activities: 1) Planning Together; 2) Aligning Instruction; and 3) Sharing Practice.

Responding to Student Needs

Many school stakeholders emphasized the significance of changing school structures to find more instructional time for student intervention. They adjusted master schedules to provide for larger blocks of core instructional time, grouped students according to learning needs for re-teaching, added lunch time and pullout interventions, extended school days, adopted Response to Intervention models, implemented formal ELA and Math intervention frameworks, provided for intensive tutoring, and created small learning communities to support freshman transition.

Building Local Accountability

Several incidents were focused on strengthening local accountability by setting clear goals and high expectations, and emphasizing that all school stakeholders – teachers, administrators, parents, and students themselves – are responsible for the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Recognizing and Rewarding Students

A few schools described pathways related to recognizing students publicly for academic achievement; these programs changed the culture of the school and promoted a more academic focus.

Using Student Data to Intervene

Effective data use resulted in greater understanding and awareness of student needs. The ongoing use of data for monitoring student progress was particularly valuable because it led to timely and focused interventions.

Strengthening Leadership

Several of the QEIA schools that were visited as part of this project experienced principal turnover due to staffing changes made by superintendents, retirement, or principals seeking other opportunities. When highly effective principals joined the staff at these QEIA schools, they infused schools with new ideas, clearer expectations, and focused plans for how to collaborate to change the tide.

FUELING THE JOURNEY

The pathway to change for these QEIA schools was not without several roadblocks. Like other QEIA schools, they struggled with financial challenges due to the ongoing fiscal crisis in California. Maintaining class size reduction was particularly difficult with shrinking general funds and diminishing resources. Furthermore, annual reductions in the teaching force due to budget cuts made it difficult for schools to retain consistent staff and sustain momentum. Additionally, like all organizations working toward systemic change, our exemplary schools noted that building the initial commitment necessary for improvement was sometimes challenging. Across the board, stakeholders in these exemplary schools emphasized five common features of their schools and cultures that helped them stay on the path and mitigate the roadblocks:

1. Exemplary Leadership;
2. A Common Vision;
3. Willingness to Change and Innovate;
4. Ongoing and Open Communication; and
5. Relentless Drive and Dedication.

STARTING THE JOURNEY

Given the significance of effective collaboration, this may be a good starting point for any school. Effective collaboration was described in the first report of this series and stresses the importance of key prerequisites – commitment, willingness to innovate, trust and respect, and supportive leadership. These prerequisites should be coupled with a variety of supportive structures, including frequent and regular time to collaborate; well-defined, formal teams with clear expectations; and a key leader who champions the effort and keeps the team on task.

Secondly, the emphasis on building local accountability and maintaining high expectations for teaching and learning, specifically, suggests the need for school leaders to set ambitious, but reachable goals for all their learners. These goals should be communicated to all members of the school community along with clear expectations about how everyone has a role in the change process. Progress must be monitored regularly and communicated openly to strengthen collective accountability for success.

Moreover, the prevalence of incidents focused specifically on understanding student needs and intervening appropriately – either through targeted interventions or instructional changes due to class size reduction – suggests a critical action: put systems and structures in place for getting to know students and their learning needs. School stakeholders should be equipped to both assess frequently and interpret data to identify opportunities for re-teaching. Small groups and one-on-one instruction provide additional mechanisms for getting to know student needs. Once those needs are known, master schedules can allow for more flexible intervention time that can be used for grouping students and working with them to get them back on track when they are behind. Creative approaches to finding more instructional time – after school, at lunch, before school – can be used to intervene in meaningful ways.

Lastly, the importance of an exemplary administrator to guide the effort must not be overlooked. In this report and the first report in the series, stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that an effective principal was a prerequisite for change.

The first two reports in this series provide valuable information about QEIA implementation and impacts. QEIA served as a catalyzing event for schools; stakeholders capitalized on the opportunity to change structures, establish systems, and provide better instruction to learners. These lessons can be used broadly by other schools seeking their own quality improvement.