
Introduction

Investment in education is not only about money, it's also an investment in people and an investment in the future.

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011)

IMPROVING SCHOOLS MATTER

Globally there is an increasing demand for better schools and improved outcomes for all students. The sense of urgency is aggravated by concerns about the future, the current state of internationally linked economies, and the need to ensure that our children will be well positioned in the global market place to become successful and independent. Governments see education as a key strategy and have adopted accountability for educational results as a cornerstone of their political agendas. Improvement is demanded; standards are being enforced. The requirement for evidence about improved student achievement is a fact of life and the pressure on school systems to deliver better results grows exponentially as concerns about the economy mount. This means that schools and school systems must move from analysis to action using feedback based on evidence of student achievement improvements.

A search in Google for “school improvement” yields 135 million hits. Clearly, people and experts are saying a lot about this topic. Not surprisingly, there is controversy and contradiction. At the core of this contradiction is the perceived tension between the aspiration to be collaborative instructional leaders and the growing demands for greater accountability. The first is based on taking time and building relationships and capacity as required while the need to immediately deliver improved results drives the second. How does one integrate collegiality and accountability? How does one resolve this seeming disconnect? How does one know if the intended directions and strategies are working? How does one provide assurance that

improvement is happening when results seem to be lagging? Traditionally, external monitoring mechanisms for schools and school systems have been formal, hierarchical, and very high-stakes. Examples of these are national and state or provincial exams, school inspections, and school or district audits. While these can be effective external pressures to drive accountability and change, the fact is that these are processes done or perceived to be done *to* schools and not *with* schools. It is not a surprise that the primary reaction is often one of compliance. When the source of the external pressure is removed the tendency is to maintain the status quo and more familiar and often less productive ways of conducting work.

As former superintendents, school inspectors, auditors, and senior administrators, we appreciate how nerve-racking it can be to have a team of external “experts” descend on your school or school system and apply externally created standards as a lens to assess what you are doing. Many of these efforts are based on a deficit model, which then frames the findings in terms of shortcomings. We have been on the receiving and delivery end of such high-stakes accountability efforts and understand how disheartening and disabling this can be for those who really want to make changes. The lack of involvement and introspective examination of “what we do,” gathering evidence about how well this works, and exploring “how we might do it better” becomes a real barrier to effective conversations about change and how to go about it.

WHY A RESOURCE ON SCHOOL REVIEWS

The need for a resource on school reviews is something that both of us have been thinking about as we have been conducting different types of reviews within educational systems. In this book, we demonstrate how our construct of *collaborative school reviews* can be used to deal with this apparent disconnect, and advocate the application of a collegial approach within existing structures and budgets while advancing the effective reshaping of schools with a heightened sense of immediacy. Our approach reshapes from the inside out and blends two seemingly contradictory strategies. Recognizing the sense of urgency, our model incorporates the traditional use of data-driven evidence with a logic model that focuses on the connection between inputs (teaching strategies) and results (student achievement data). This plus the overlay of collaboration and a change management model distinguishes our concept of collaborative school reviews from other models of school reviews currently in practice. We weave three outcomes throughout this resource: (1) increased and intentional coherence across classrooms and schools, (2) positive accountability, and (3) targeted capacity building linked

to student achievement. Our aim is to demonstrate how to decrease the variability among and between schools and enhance coherency and intentionality to realize increased student results.

One of the things we hope this book will provoke is dialogue focused on the key drivers of change leading to collaborative improvement, especially at a time of systemic reform such as the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or the drive to dramatically improve student achievement on national and international assessments. We want to foster conversations based on the collective responsibility and involvement required for improving instruction in schools and school systems. This innovative process can be applied at a district and a school level depending on your role and need. The aim is ease of implementation and sustainability of changes.

WHAT MAKES THIS APPROACH DIFFERENT?

Our model differs from other types of school reviews in terms of the following characteristics:

- The reviews are designed as change management strategies.
- The focus is building collaborative relationships among staff.
- The aim is to engage staff in building shared understanding, accountability, and commitment to improving learning to impact achievement.
- Capacity building is an embedded component of the process.
- A work plan for moving forward is a requirement.

In our model, the school selects the areas of focus and has more control on how the design and planning of the reviews emerge. This design requires collaboration between the school and district. Collaboration and attention to evidence support innovation and change. Our starting point is collaborative school reviews that are designed and implemented in partnership rather than reviews imposed on schools.

We build our proposed collaborative school review process within a strategic change management framework that is grounded on accountability and responsibility.

- Schools reflect on the impact of their teaching strategies on student learning.
- Schools select the areas of learning where they want feedback, but always within the district's predefined improvement priorities and focus.

4 ● Collaborative School Reviews

- School staff work with district staff to mold the process, but within a common districtwide review framework.
- School staff are part of the analysis and the solution, but within a shared data management environment.
- School staff build the collaborative school review improvement plan, but within the districtwide improvement agenda.
- School staff take responsibility for implementing changes, but within a prescribed accountability framework.

The use of a strategic change management framework based on continuous improvement ensures that the school's analysis is robust and informed so that selection of the areas for feedback is focused and germane to improved student outcomes.

- As the intent is to shape school reform from the inside out, a collective learning process, for the schools and the district based on continuous improvement, is integral to the design of each review.
- Capacity building is a component of the process: it is a non-negotiable of the review process.
- Staff engagement is a key driver: it is used to build the collective sense of purpose and urgency required to make significant, timely, and sustained changes.

We regard collaborative school reviews not as isolated unique incidents, but rather as components of the larger system's improvement agenda. Too often, schools view themselves as fiefdoms and not part of a coherent, interdependent, and focused school system. Too often, districts overwhelm schools with a myriad of demands and initiatives. To be sustainable and flourish, initiatives for school improvement need to be focused and aligned as well as contextualized and supported by the larger system. We weave this into the resource. Schools working independently as well as districts working to coordinate larger system improvement can benefit.

Our Lens Is the School

If you are in the midst of implementing change initiatives and want to understand if you are on track, or if you have implemented and you want to assess impact, collaborative school reviews grounded in shared accountability are a very powerful resource. We firmly believe that the expertise to improve the work that educators do resides within each school and school system: the real solutions and answers lie with staff. The trick is to extract this expertise and harness it into a planned and systematic improvement process engendering a collegial approach where learning is for everyone and

everyone contributes to the development of effective practices. This is what we model.

THIS IS A HOW-TO RESOURCE

Collaborative school reviews are a path to improvement. This book provides a resource on how to go about designing, planning, implementing, and monitoring the effectiveness of school reviews. We combine research with practice. In Chapter 1, we explore big questions, and set the stage by introducing our strategic change management framework as the organizer for collaborative school reviews. Chapter 2 focuses on the design of the collaborative school review process. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate planning at the district and school levels, respectively. Chapter 5 provides three examples for the rollout of reviews and Chapter 6 examines how to unpack findings at the local and district level including analysis, feedback, and action planning through monitoring to ensure follow through. If you are reading this through the school lens you may want to bypass the district components and look at only the school-based components. In Chapter 7, we draw our conclusions. Each chapter includes tools, examples, and areas for discussion as well as a summary. Throughout we talk about what the district needs to tightly hold to ensure a systemic benefit and what can be loosely held in the purview of the schools under review.

How It Can Help You

We know improving the quality of schools is important to you. This resource provides a range of choices based on your unique requirements. We are not imposing standards that are external to your district or school.

- We examine how the improvement and change process is influenced by your context and culture, and discuss how these might be factored into your design.
- The embedded practical tools and forms offer choices and models for consideration as you apply the process to your own setting.
- Questions are posed as “Reader Reflections.” You can use these as an inquiry focus for your own learning teams.
- The strategic lens provides a framework and organizer for the review process by focusing on the four key components of management: (1) design, (2) planning, (3) implementation, and (4) monitoring and evaluation.
- To make the process more accessible for you—the reader—we present our information through a case study, Lone Birch School District.

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The district, schools, and educators described are loosely based on an amalgam of real schools that have been part of actual school review processes that we have conducted. We use this case study format to blend theory and best practice within the lens of a real-world situation. We deal with those issues that are representative of both larger and smaller school boards as well as urban, rural, and remote districts. We demonstrate how to gather and analyze data from reviews to identify trends, patterns, and outliers to build a data tapestry.

- Additionally, we show how this can be used at the district level to inform future reviews and to establish benchmarks for improvement.

This resource can be used effectively by district teams, while stand-alone schools, including independent or private schools, will also find the model applicable. In summary, our model differs from other models both in its intentionality and design. It is the product of our collective eighty years experience.



For further information and additional resources, please visit the website associated with this book at www.collaborativeschoolreviews.com.

1 **Setting the Stage**

This chapter introduces our concept of *collaborative school reviews* as opportunities for transformational school- and district-based change, our strategic lens as a framework for shaping and organizing the process, and then our case study as a practical illustration to apply the process. We blend theory with practices known to be effective to improve teaching and learning in schools and classrooms with a goal of raising standards and narrowing achievement gaps.

COLLABORATIVE SCHOOLS REVIEWS

A Path for Improvement

What Is a School Review?

A school review is a methodical assessment of the connection between the processes and activities that the school and district believe ought to contribute to student achievement and the student achievement evidential data. Typically, the review is conducted by a team of educators examining student achievement data, observing processes and activities, and providing findings and recommendations. Unlike audits and inspections, school review teams are drawn from the school district but its members are external to the school being reviewed. While audits and inspections are summative, school reviews are formative. They are part of the learning process for improvement. Inspections and audits follow prescribed structures and standards and can examine a wide range of information from governance,

facilities, staffing, policies, and budgets, in addition to teaching and learning. Recommendations stemming from inspections and audits may or may not be mandated. School reviews, on the other hand, narrow the reviewing lens by specifically focusing on teaching and learning, and emphasizing a few key areas drawn from the school's data that are known to be directly linked to improved learning and student achievement.

What Distinguishes Collaborative School Reviews From Other Reviews?

Time and resources are limited commodities. External audits and reviews can be costly. We thus emphasize the collegial approach, the effective use of time and resources, and the need to develop shared understanding and practices within a structured format. Collaborative school reviews are a partnership between the district and school aimed at improving teaching and learning at the school and classroom level. For us, the essential considerations include the following:

- *Both districts and schools matter.* Collaborative school reviews are a districtwide effort, but the process needs to be contextualized to meet individual district and school needs and realities.
- *Improved learning and teaching practice are the focus.* Collaborative school reviews use the school's own improvement plan to explore which effective practices are being implemented from the improvement plan and which are not. The school gathers evidence of instructional and curricular practices that are research-informed and designed to increase student learning and achievement. For instance, what evidence is there of balanced literacy or the implementation of practices aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)?
- *Collaborative school reviews are a cost-effective way of continuous improvement and should be seen as part of the overall leadership and management role.* There is no need to hire external staff or contract out. Internal roles can be redesigned, time designated, and funding reallocated from other less impactful priorities and strategies. This repositioning of roles may require some initial investment in capacity building but this would in the long run yield significant benefits for the students and for the system. The process is grounded on building the skills and capacity of staff at a school and system level. It's all about learning.
- *Schools are the unit of change.* The school collaboratively selects the areas it wants to highlight and focuses on improved school learning aligned to the district's priorities or goals. These initial selections include areas for reinforcement, where the school staff perceives gains are being made but wants to continue to improve, and areas where staff may still be at the awareness level and implementation varies widely and requires critical feedback to move

the school further along the continuum of change, for instance, implementing strategies such as an increased use of informational text, analyzing texts, or the effective use of technology. The school gathers and selects the evidence creating a data portrait to support the areas of focus and areas for feedback to highlight during the review process. This is an opportunity for school faculties to collaborate in gathering and presenting schoolwide evidence as indicators of success for their areas of focus. Because the staff determines the areas of focus, buy-in occurs and it is easier to engage school staff in the review process and develop their collective ownership for proposed improvement strategies.

- *The link to district priorities is a critical requirement to ensure connectivity and coherence with district directions.* By ensuring this as a component in preparation for the review, the school staff becomes better informed about and more likely to engage with district goals and priorities. This reduces the differences among and between schools in terms of implementing effective practice that impact student learning; it develops greater understanding of how each unique school fits within the overall context of the broader system.

- *All aspects of classrooms count.* The external review team visits every instructional space during their onsite visit to determine coherency and intentionality across classrooms with regard to the areas of focus designated by the school. Research documents the persistence of detrimental variations in teacher practice even among teachers in the same building and even when the school implemented comprehensive and prescriptive whole-school reforms (Fullan, 2011; Hattie, 2012). Feedback on the degree of alignment of practice across classrooms can thus support effective learning.

- *Reviews are formative.* The goal is *assessment for learning*. Data are used to inform the school's improvement plan and improvement implementation process. All participants need to be able to take the feedback to inform practice. Think of the outcome of these reviews as descriptive feedback.

- *Collaborative school reviews use a change management framework to build a culture of continuous improvement and growth.* The assumption is that we are along a continuum of improvement. All schools are included in an ongoing cycle of reviews. The reports from the collaborative school reviews focus on areas of strength and areas for improvement at a school and district level. They can be layered for analysis to move the schools and districts along the continuum of good to great.

- *Collaborative school reviews create a data tapestry.* Evidence regarding learning and student success is gathered and monitored from a variety of data sources including onsite classroom visits. In addition to constructing this data tapestry, the collaborative school review model requires that goals and targets for improvement be directly linked to the district's and the data collection ensures that improvement can be tracked. It provides an opportunity to build data literacy and the ability to effectively use data to enhance teaching practice and ultimately student learning.

- *School improvement is a shared process.* Staff are involved in developing findings and actively participate in the development of the go-forward agenda. The findings are unpacked at the school level, with a key focus on the right findings and identifying appropriate high-yield strategies. External resources and expertise can enrich the findings and increase the viability of the actions for moving forward. Collaborative school reviews provide an opportunity for the school to access external expertise and supports.

- *Learning is a collective process both at the school and district level.* The review team is external to the school, but drawn from the local district. The external review team members have a better understanding of the district's unique culture and context and bring added expertise and experience but not added cost. Internally, the key is openness to the examination of one's teaching practice and participation in the development of improvement strategies. This happens best when teachers see the review as an opportunity to learn and grow collectively and not as a punitive measure. By linking best practices across the district, teachers can better learn from one another both within and beyond their specific school community. This means that capacity building becomes an element that has to be strictly guided and driven by need rather than want. Thus this becomes an opportunity to better focus capacity-building efforts to more effectively meet both district priorities and school needs.

- *Effective collaborative school reviews are respectful of educators' professionalism, recognizing that context and leadership are significant considerations.* We demonstrate how the jurisdictions, the drivers, and the expectations and vision for the school leadership role (principal, head teacher) can be carefully factored in when designing and implementing collaborative school reviews. They support the development of their skills as change leaders.

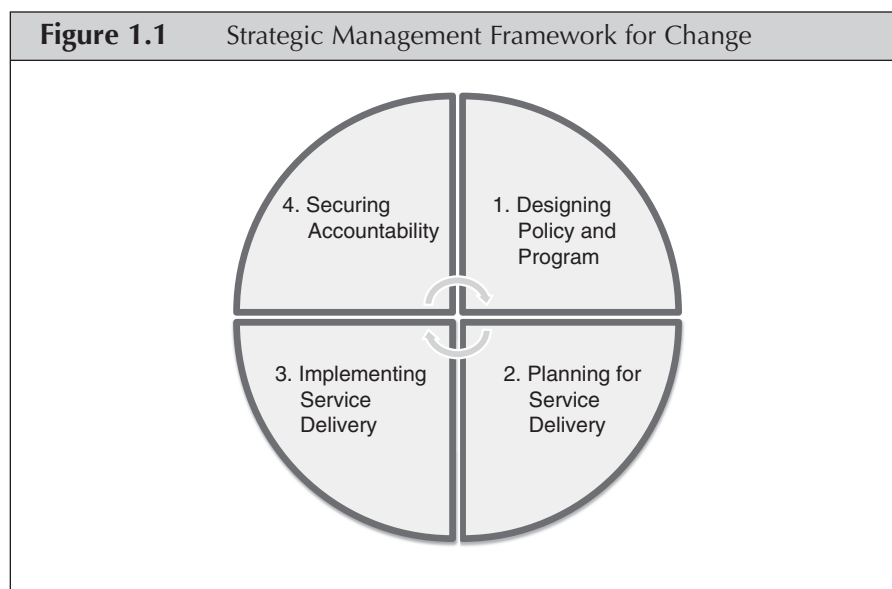
- *Collaborative school reviews are not a one-size-fits-all model.* The concepts we propose can be customized to apply across systems and an existing range of practices.

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

A Strategic Lens to Conceptualize Collaborative School Reviews

A key requirement for school improvement is for the overall organization to provide the wrap-around supports a school needs to achieve excellence. The collaborative school review model requires a direct tie between the school review process and the system's broader effectiveness effort such as implementing 21st-century learning or Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This ensures that the changes made at the school level are coherent and in sync with the system direction. Without this tie, change is likely to be sporadic and individualized and consequently less likely to be sustainable.

We overlay our vision for collaborative school reviews with a four-quadrant strategic framework and anchor the review process within a continuous improvement model. The four quadrants comprise the four key components of an effective strategic management process: (1) policy and program design, (2) planning, (3) implementation and monitoring, (4) assessment and adjustment. These quadrants are both sequential and interconnected with actions in one quadrant depending on and being informed by actions and data in the others (see Figure 1.1).



The four-quadrant lens provides the framework to ensure that collaborative school reviews become a more thoughtful and analytical process; it also allows data to drive the organization's decisions about its directions, strategies, adjustments to policy and programs, and delivery strategies and mechanisms. This includes data about external drivers and best practices as well as internal evidence of how the organization functions and how well it is achieving its mandate and goals.

We examine the collaborative school review process, key tasks, and activities within the context and prerogatives of each of these four quadrants. These provide a disciplined approach and a broader strategic perspective for the collaborative school review. Each element is examined, contextualized, and addressed in a logical, feasible, and systematic manner to strategically focus the collaborative school review on essential improvement. Figure 1.2 demonstrates how this lens will apply to the school review process.

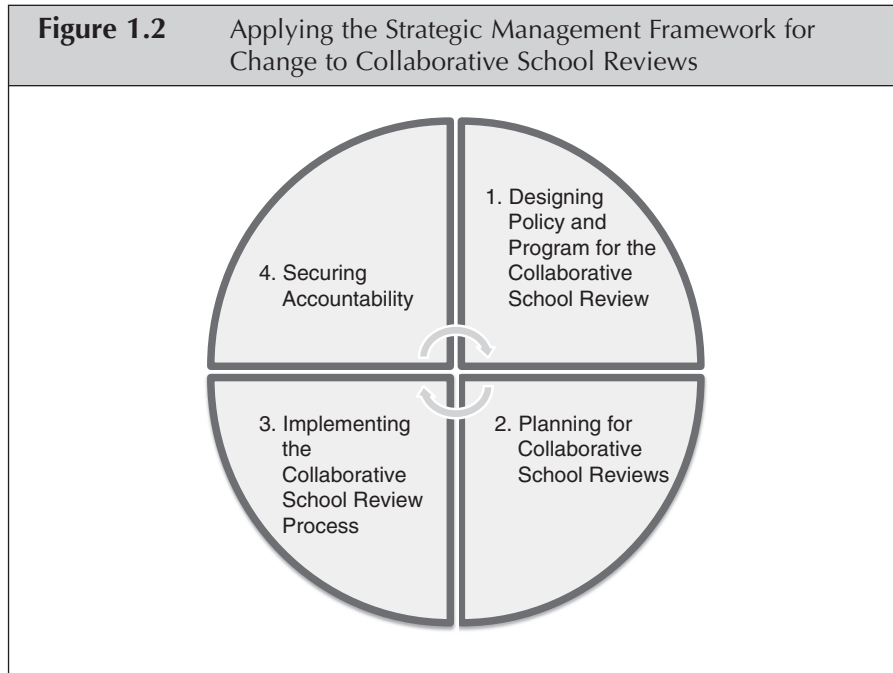


Figure 1.3 provides a discussion of each quadrant—what it involves and how we propose to apply it to the collaborative school review process.

As educators, we often spend our time in the day-to-day implementation issues—what we call Quadrant 3, or the delivery quadrant—failing to realize the importance of doing work in the other quadrants to ensure we have the proper direction, structure, and resourcing in place to achieve our goals. This attention is essential to ensure that we have focused on the right things and have drawn our conclusions based on evidence. What we are looking for is a proactive and rational way to proceed that is widely understood and supported within the district and not just a reactive, individually led, and isolated approach to change. The goal is to achieve greater intentionality and coherency in developing effective collaborative practice to support academic achievement and close gaps both within an individual school and across a system of schools. This is what is required to embed and sustain improvement.

Collaborative School Reviews as Opportunities for Transformational Change

Is the intended really happening in schools and classrooms? We recognize that there are a variety of obstacles that challenge the implementation of systemic change: wide variability in quality across classrooms and schools, the punitive use of accountability measures, and fragmented and nonaligned professional development. Using collaborative school reviews is a strategic

Figure 1.3 The Four-Quadrant Approach

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 1 anchors the organization through an emphasis on the ties to organizational vision, mission, and direction—and subsequently to policy formulation, strategy development, and program design. It calls for the organization to systematically pause and think strategically about what it might achieve and to strategize how it will do that. It puts an emphasis on the use of data garnered through the other quadrants to ground it in the here and now so that it can look at ways to develop and improve. This is where the organization establishes its mission, sets a vision and goals, develops its strategy, and determines its course of action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 1, the design quadrant, focuses on developing the foundation for collaborative school reviews. It involves discussion about its tie to the vision, mission, and the district and establishes the vision for the school reviews. It sets measurable targets or outcomes for improvement, establishes policies, develops the design, and sets the procedures and protocols for the use of collaborative school reviews as a tool for improvement. The communication strategy and plan is a critical element for moving forward.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 2 focuses the organization on a disciplined approach to planning. It calls on the organization to have a planning process in place, and conduct planning as a joint activity so that the myriad activities the various departments undertake can be better connected, coordinated, and interrelated. Planning puts an emphasis on ensuring that the strategies and actions delineated in Quadrant 1 drive service delivery and are not lost in the busy and complex day-to-day work. This is where the organization establishes meaning for the range of activities it engages in and ensures that its resources appropriately and equitably align to the overall vision and goals. Plans must include developing and building organizational capacity—both human and material—and managing data and communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 2, the planning quadrant, focuses on planning the reviews—what needs to be put in place and how the process will unfold systemwide. It requires developing two distinct but related plans: a system plan and a school-specific plan. At the district level, it includes creating the implementation schedules and the actions that support alignment across the system. Time lines and roles or responsibilities for each review are identified and a plan is put in place for each school that involves the schools' administration and staff. Capacity building, data management, and communication are components of each plan. Additionally, this quadrant establishes checkpoints for monitoring progress across the district to ensure effective management of the collaborative school review process and the timely resolution of issues and problems that may arise. Of particular importance is the plan for addressing issues impacting the whole district and which require a districtwide policy or direction.

(Continued)

<p>Figure 1.3 (Continued)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 3 zeros in on the day-to-day delivery. It calls on the organization to be present, observant, and reflective. It emphasizes ensuring that clients are at the core of service delivery. This requires vigilance about the effective deployment of resources—both human and material—and attention to client needs and their levels of satisfaction with services received. If planning has occurred in Quadrant 2, the predictable can be effectively managed, leaving time and resources to both deal with the less predictable and more complex service delivery issues that will inevitably arise. A key concern is fidelity to the delivery model to ensure that what actually happens is what was intended in the design of the policy and the service delivery model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 3, the implementation quadrant, focuses on implementing the collaborative school review process. It involves implementing the strategies and actions planned in Quadrant 2 and gathering and recording information or data. The critical elements are gathering and managing required data, following established processes and protocols, problem solving, maintaining relationships, communicating effectively, and sustaining momentum. At a system level, fidelity of implementation of the model is a key consideration.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 4 focuses on results. It requires that the organization (1) clearly articulates an accountable structure; (2) has the data and monitoring system it needs to analyze its progress in the achievement of its vision, mandate, and goals; and (3) has the ability to take corrective action as required. It emphasizes the accountability structures and measurement systems that need to be in place. This includes both systematic data collection and analysis, which implies agreement about what data are to be collected, when, and how; and also designing, establishing, and managing processes, formats, and protocols for data management. The efficiency of the data collection system is particularly essential in this quadrant. The goal is to ensure an optimal level of data collected in the right formats and avoid an undue burden on the system. This quadrant highlights the need for aligned capacity building to ensure the achievement of system directions and goals. The analysis here centers upon ensuring efficacy of the strategies to meet the established goals—what gets monitored gets done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quadrant 4, the securing accountability quadrant, focuses on monitoring the impact of collaborative school reviews as system improvement strategies. It includes data coding and analysis, as well as documenting, quantifying, and reporting outcomes. Critical are drawing conclusions and identifying corrective action, both for the school level and the district level. A key concern at the district level is maintaining momentum to ensure that the collaborative school reviews lead to improved outcomes. This is the monitoring function. It is necessary to evaluate the impacts of the collaborative school review process to determine its usefulness as a change management tool for the system and to identify any design adjustments to make it a more effective tool.

change management process to systematically gather evidence and provide the analysis and mechanisms to decrease variability in practice, support positive accountability, and provide targeted and aligned capacity building. The goal is to enable schools and districts to move forward with a sense of purposeful urgency. The new focus on standards and the demands for increased accountability provide such an opportunity. One of the factors contributing to the variability in practice is discussed in Dan Lortie's (2002) research on teachers' workplace orientations; he identified "presentism," or short-term thinking as one impediment to sustained change. Another is the persistence of privatization, or to paraphrase, the individualized approach to teaching, where teachers refer to "their classroom and their students" and teaching is a closed door (Little, 1990). Targeted and intentional professional learning offer a learning organization a way to move collaboratively from the present—forward.

Collaborative school reviews, when tied to accountability, provide one vehicle for propelling an organization to collectively move into a new direction. Accountability can be seen as a positive driver when there is a shared acceptance of the data or evidence, along with an understanding and acceptance of the possible pathways to improving teaching and learning. Accountability is perceived negatively when it is punitive and staff sees themselves as victims and not as the agents of positive change. Collaborative school reviews provide a dynamic way out of this conundrum. The tension between needing to improve and actual improvement is often where change stalls. Collaborative school reviews provide a mechanism for all schools to be systematically reviewed. They lead to specific suggestions that pinpoint areas of improvement required to move the school along the continuum of improvement.

OUR CASE STUDY

The Lone Birch School District

The Lone Birch School District provides a case study to blend theory and effective practices and the use of evidence into practice. Lone Birch is a generic district, positioned in North America and an amalgam informed by our understanding about school systems in general and our suggestions framed within that knowledge. The discussion thus applies, with some adjustments, to any system anywhere. You will find that Lone Birch has many similarities to your school or district and that its experiences, albeit made-up, resonate with yours.

While examining Lone Birch, we use the phrase *looking in* when reflecting with the external lens of our own expertise; we use the phrase *thinking out* as a way to comment and make suggestions for your consideration.



Looking In

Background

Schools and school systems are shaped by the culture, context, and capabilities of staff as well as students, parents, and the community. Our Lone Birch is a suburban North American school district of 25,000 students in fifty schools committed to school improvement. Its mission as reflected on its website is “All Students Achieve.” Like most school systems, it is diverse in terms of wealth, educational attainment of parents, as well as race, language, and culture.

Like many districts, despite its mission statement and culture of good intentions, the student achievement results are inconsistent. Some schools are high performing and others have large numbers of students who are underachieving and failing to graduate. While the overall district student achievement results are slowly increasing, achievement gaps remain. Some of the achievement gaps appear to be tied to traditional sociodemographic indicators (poverty, English language learners [ELL], mobility, educational levels of parents); however, boys are underachieving in terms of literacy in affluent and less affluent areas. There are high-performing schools in lower socioeconomic and more culturally and linguistically diverse areas. For example, Pleasant Valley Elementary School, a JK–6 school with 400 students and situated in a lower sociodemographic and high ELL neighborhood, has shown improvement on student achievement indicators in the last two years. Meadows Middle School, a traditional school with 300 students in Grades 7–8, is not performing as well. Performance is stalled and the school has high suspension and failure rates. Harper High School, with over 800 students from a traditionally affluent area, is proud of its achievement record. These three will be the pilot schools used to demonstrate the application of collaborative school review processes.

Since Lea assumed the superintendent role four years ago, the emphasis districtwide has been improving student achievement, emphasizing outcomes in literacy and numeracy, and increasing the credit completion and graduation rates. Although pleased with Lone Birch’s progress, the senior administration team and board members are frustrated with the inconsistent range in achievement results from student to student and school to school. The mission may be “All Students Achieve,” but the reality is that many are not. The senior team recognizes the differences between and among schools in Lone Birch and they are asking, “How do we become more effective and consistent?” Their aim is for high quality and low variability across classrooms and across schools. Lea, in a speech to board members, references Marzano and Waters’s (2009) findings from the Mid-continent Research in Education or McREL. They concluded that “high instructional quality with low variability among teachers is a hallmark of the world’s best-performing education systems” (116).

The board members repeatedly ask: How do we go from good to great? What should be our pathway? There is the Lone Birch District Improvement Plan (LBDIP) and each school has created its own school improvement plan (SIP), in theory aligned to the central plan. The assistant superintendents of schools have reviewed the written SIPs, but plans have to be implemented and continuously monitored and revised. Lea often says “what gets monitored gets done.” Improvement is happening but in pockets and not yet districtwide. She and her team are feeling the pressure from the board members, and also the public, to close gaps and demonstrate increased improvement. Lea’s senior team is composed of her three associate superintendents as the supervisors of schools—Dante, Juan, and Katie—and the two central-assigned coordinating principals—Clay and Maria. All six are committed to raising the academic bar but they know to do so they also have to close the existing achievement gaps through changed classroom and school practices.

Two years ago, Lone Birch upgraded its student information collection system and increased the use of digital technologies in its schools. From her experience in a previous school district, Lea has brought her commitment to using data effectively—evidence informed decision making or EIDM. Lea wants to create a data tapestry of students’ achievement, so Lone Birch is now gathering and using data from a multitude of sources including standardized assessments (in your jurisdiction they could be state, national, or provincial), credit completions, suspension, attendance, graduation, report cards, and attitudinal survey data to name a few. Data are disaggregated by gender, by students with special needs, and by ELL. These will become individual threads to be woven together in the tapestry. Lea was hoping the last set of high-stakes assessments would show a greater degree of improvement across the underperforming schools as a result of the district’s change initiatives, but that didn’t happen consistently. The bar is rising in Lone Birch but achievement gaps remain.

Like many districts, Lone Birch faces declining enrollments and decreasing budgets. Lea understands this means she and her team must be more strategic in their approach, given the fiscal restraints. The public wants evidence of improvement, but what to emphasize and what to discontinue? How can Lea and her team really know how they can strategically impact achievement in all schools and classrooms within Lone Birch?

Lea and her team gather to discuss the current district improvement plan, which will require revisions the following year. Key questions include: What is really happening in our schools in terms of teaching and learning? What do the data say? What data tapestry is created? More specifically, the team acknowledges the need to address the following:

- Are the Lone Birch directions being effectively implemented across schools? Is the intended really happening? What are our indicators, or look-fors, of success?

- Are the current professional development (PD) sessions we supported at the district and at the school level paying off? Is pedagogy deepening and practice changing in the classrooms? Has instructional leadership improved and become more intentional and focused?
- How can we help reduce the variation and increase the quality across our schools?
- How are we as a senior management team really impacting student achievement? How can we become more responsive and effective?

Lea tries to be in at least one school every two weeks but sometimes these feel like staged events. As superintendent, she worries: Does she really know what is happening beyond her campus visits, conversations with administrators, and reports from the schools' supervisors? Lone Birch has some data sets, but she needs the data tapestry to have a clearer idea of regular classroom practice. What could or should she and her team be doing differently? She knows that the schools that were not achieving to expectations are frustrated too. Some are experiencing resistance to further change. She wonders: Is she pushing too hard or moving too fast, or not hard and fast enough?

Katie and Clay have attended a presentation on collaborative school reviews and now wonder if this process could provide some of the answers to the questions Lea has posed. They share what they heard, and Lea asks that they present to all of senior administration. After much discussion, the senior team agrees to proceed and consider a pilot for collaborative school reviews. Piloting before scaling up is the Lone Birch way of implementing change and they have used this option with other systemwide initiatives. Lea reminds the team that improving schools is neither simple nor for the fainthearted. Change comes with opportunities and risks.

Reader Reflections

Is the Lone Birch senior team asking the right questions?

Are these the types of questions you are asking in your own school or district?

What areas of challenge do you currently face?

What is your experience with variability between classes and schools?

How are you monitoring progress in each school and across schools?

What is the monitoring telling you?



Thinking Out

Effective schools are reliant on effective staff. To decrease variation and increase quality, the research indicates that the system leadership needs to create the conditions to promote and sustain the instructional leadership of school-based administrators (principals, head teachers) and their teaching staffs. The focus must be an intentional, aligned, and coordinated approach to change. Collaborative school reviews are designed to provide just that. System leaders can establish the joint direction, shared vision, and understanding required for engagement in the improvement process. Setting collective goals can develop teamwork, common focus on continuous improvement, and feelings of self and collective efficacy. Developing the collective capacity across the system enables change to move forward consistently and with a shared sense of urgency. To actualize measurable goals and targets requires data systems to gather, aggregate, disaggregate, monitor, and analyze student achievement data to provide the accountability structure. Effective systems require all of these components working seamlessly and interchangeably. School and system improvement is like rocket science—it is complex, multilayered, and reliant on research and best practices. Effective leaders strategically seize the moment to bring about improvement while building collective capacity. How are collaborative school reviews situated within the school and school-system effectiveness effort?

Where to begin? What should come first?

These areas are addressed in the next chapter.

Reader Reflections

Do you know that in many American states, the corrections department examines the number of students reading on grade level for Grades 2–4 to predict the number of prison spaces they will require? (Bernhardt, 2004)

If educational data can inform the building of prisons, surely it can be used to inform and improve the practice of teaching and learning.

IN SUMMARY

Collaborative school reviews differ from typical school reviews in a number of critical ways:

- They are anchored on a collaborative model that includes schools in the planning and implementation of the review.

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- They are embodied within a high level of accountability.
- Staff capacity building is a core goal and strategy.
- Continuous improvement powers the process.

As we proceed, Lone Birch will be used throughout this guide to illustrate the application of the concept. This real-life situation provides a practical example of why and how collaborative school reviews might be implemented in your schools and districts.



For further information and additional resources, please visit the website associated with this book at www.collaborativeschoolreviews.com.