

Frameworks for Continuous School Improvement: A Synthesis of Essential Concepts

Position Paper
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Middle Level Leadership Center
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To develop and maintain a school improvement process that promotes success for each student, principals and teachers must understand and implement two unique but interrelated “frameworks” for improvement. The frameworks are complex and require time to understand and establish. Once established, they are fragile and difficult to maintain. The following discussions briefly explain each framework and the significance of the concepts “comprehensive” and “systemic.”

The Student-Centered Content Framework

The Student-Centered Content Framework (see attachment) defines the knowledge of best educational practice and the application of practices that promote the success of each student. This “content” framework personalizes the knowledge of effective schooling, drawing upon a contemporary understanding of effective leadership and pedagogy and the structures of schooling that support leadership and pedagogy. This framework personifies the “caring” nature of a successful school culture.

The student-centered framework has three primary components that must be implemented within a caring, collaborative school culture and a climate of trust and respect if it is to positively impact success for each student. The components are Organizational Leadership, Organizational Pedagogy, and Organizational Structures. The environment is Trusting and Respectful, and the culture is Caring and Collaborative.

Organizational Leadership

Leadership within an effective school begins with a “transformational” principal who establishes a belief system and related practices that disperse leadership and ownership for success across a wide segment of the school faculty. Instructional leadership that makes a statement about the importance of quality educational practice and managerial leadership that establish effective and efficient policies and routines for smooth day-by-day school operations are necessary but not adequate. Likewise, creating structures and opportunities for distributing leadership responsibilities is not adequate to meet the tenets of transformational leadership. In fact, distributive leadership may be viewed more as abdication of responsibility than diffusion of ownership. The principal must establish a culture that transforms how individuals view leadership, moving the mental image of leadership from one of power vested in a select few to one of empowerment of all who would accept the challenge of ownership for student success. Transformational leadership generates energy for ownership of student success. The power to make change is transformed; staff members feel empowered to make a difference. Time invested outside the classroom takes on new meaning as staff members collaboratively work to support school-wide improvement. What teachers do within their classroom also takes on new meaning as they attempt to match personal work with espoused statements of school-wide quality. Ownership for quality evolves because the principal creates the conditions that empower staff to redefine individual mission and vision into a collective commitment to the school’s mission and vision.

Organizational Pedagogy

The product of learning and its related developmental outcomes of emotional, social, and physical development make the business of education unique. Thus, any comprehensive approach to school improvement must address the core knowledge of schooling. For example, integrated curriculum and authentic, constructivist teaching approaches are recognized as significant practices for student understanding of content, higher-order thinking, and problem-solving skills while other, more traditional practices are touted as appropriate for responsiveness on certain forms of standardized tests. Exclusive use of one or two practices may not meet the needs of all students and may, based upon existing knowledge about how students learn, deny to many the opportunity to succeed. Differentiated approaches to instruction and varied formative and summative forms of assessment fit contemporary understandings of how students learn. Learning theories abound and educators must know those varied theories, understand their value in selected situations, and apply them effectively so each young adolescent is given the best opportunity to succeed. What is known about how young adolescents learn? In what ways are students different at the various developmental stages during the schooling experience? What curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices best fit these developmental progressions? Any meaningful effort to improve the schooling process must include the study of these questions and thus the pedagogical components of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These components are the business of schooling.

Organizational Structures

The organizational structures of the school must fit the desired leadership and pedagogical practices established by the values and beliefs, the mission and vision, and the implementation strategies to accomplish the vision. Form should follow function and in the case of school improvement, the organizational structures must evolve from the leadership and pedagogical components of the framework. Staff members must collaboratively identify the best models for organizing time, scheduling curriculum, and defining the learning environment. Conversely, structure influences relationships. Organizational structures should be established that foster interaction and interpersonal relationship-building, both among and between students, teachers, administrators, parents, community, and others with vested interests in students' successes. Structures should also be established that collect and utilize data to assess and inform school improvement, school success, and individual student success. Staff members must be hired because they embody the competencies needed to educate young adolescents. Professional development must be designed and implemented to address the needs of those who teach young adolescents. Woven throughout the fabric of the structures used in the school are the essential elements of collaboration, relationship development, and progress toward the accomplishment of the school vision.

Trusting, Respectful Climate

Climate is to an organization what attitude is to the individual. It is determined primarily by the relationships among the teachers and administrators of the school. It is the collective perceptions of the working conditions within which the educators function. Trust and respect are necessary if staff members, school administrators, parents, and others with vested interests in a quality school are to work together effectively. Discussions during the development of the values' and beliefs' statements build a foundation for trust and respect. Discussions that lead to collaborative development of the mission, vision, goals, and implementation strategies further define those relationships. The manner with which a principal implements instructional and managerial roles further establishes images of trust and respect in the minds of the staff. And

finally, the principal's competence as a transformational leader directly correlates to the school's climate. The ability to empower and establish ownership among the faculty is associated with the skills of the principal and the climate the principal establishes. Without a climate of trust and respect, even the best pedagogy and structure will have marginal effect upon the success of each student.

Caring, Collaborative Culture

The culture is often defined as the "way we do things around here." It represents the values, the beliefs, the assumptions, and the traditions of the organization. A caring, collaborative culture is slow to evolve and difficult to maintain.

A school's culture should represent a caring about the success of others, particularly students. It should represent collaborative relationships that place the success of each student at the fore. The value system of the school should expect that each student be given the support necessary to be a successful member of the school community. Effective cultures are led by transformational leaders who value and foster collaboration, empowerment, and ownership. The culture embraces continuous professional development, self-reflection, progressive thinking, and risk-taking, all in the interest of success for each student. Staff members place student success ahead of personal convenience. They are committed to a quality school for each student. The culture of the school is a collection of the shared assumptions of the members of the school that either inhibit or facilitate student growth. Leaders have the power to shape the culture by addressing these assumptions.

Once established, the truly caring, collaborative culture is the foundation for candid, continuous discussions about how to better serve students. It is an essential ingredient for long-term, continuous school improvement.

The Vision-Driven Process Framework

The second framework defines the processes necessary to initiate and maintain organizational change. The processes for improvement in a step-by-step linear fashion commonly necessary when "initiating" comprehensive, systemic school improvement is presented in Attachment B1. The process presented in Attachment B2 represents a more fluid, macro image of change processes common once a school has "internalized" the change process. Both levels of sophistication support the development, accomplishment, and maintenance of a vision (direction) for school improvement. The frameworks personalize the knowledge of organizational development into vision-centered images of improvement.

Vision-Driven

At the center of the framework are the Vision of the school and the Goals necessary to accomplish the vision. The vision is a conception of what the school should become over the next three to five years, developed deliberately by the faculty and grounded in the knowledge of Best Practice and a Commitment to best practice. The Values and Beliefs and the Mission of the organization inform the vision. The vision is implemented through a set of strategies and tasks defined in the school-wide Action Plan. School Component Focus Teams involve all staff members in the development of the school's Action Plan. The focus teams represent the major components necessary for the school to function effectively, such as curriculum, instruction, leadership, resources, and professional development. As the Action Plan is Implemented, progress is Assessed and the findings inform future vision development and define levels of goal accomplishment.

The first time a school progresses through the steps of the vision-driven change process, each step is taken in a deliberate and unique fashion. Once the school has progressed through the

linear steps two or three times, the understanding of the complexity of the process evolves and progression toward internalizing the process as part of the school's culture becomes evident. Once internalized, the process becomes a fluid sequence of "big picture" images, still centered around the vision, but implemented through a continuous process of building knowledge of best practice, refining the vision per best practice, assessing existing practice, establishing goals and plans for change, and implementing those plans. Values and beliefs are slow to change, but the school's vision should be revisited annually, and development of professional knowledge should be a continuous process.

Data collected about existing practices within the school setting are used to inform the organizational goals, not shape the vision. If the vision is data-driven, then the process becomes one of responding to deficiencies within the school setting, rather than responding to the knowledge of best practices and permitting that response to resolve the deficiencies en route to meeting the challenges of best practice. A vision driven by deficiencies is short-lived and infrequently effective in making a meaningful difference in schooling. Such changes are often mandated by state or district policy and frequently are defined by specific student achievement scores. Improving test scores and any other form of student success is a complex challenge and requires a complex, not a simplistic approach. Only through comprehensive, systemic processes grounded in the content knowledge of best practice can meaningful change take place.

Comprehensive and Systemic Frameworks

Both frameworks for school improvement are comprehensive and systemic. The following provides an explanation of these important concepts.

Comprehensive

The frameworks are comprehensive because the components within the frameworks are broad in scope, addressing the best knowledge about all critical aspects of educational practices and organizational change. In the "content" framework, for example, changing organizational structures from a departmentalized to an interdisciplinary approach does not improve student academic achievement. To impact achievement, curriculum must be refined to fit with the organizational structure and instructional practices must be adapted to fit both the revised curriculum and the new structure. Another example, within the "process" framework, would be the adoption of a set of goals designed specifically to improve classroom instruction. While such focus has the potential to impact student achievement, such a narrow focus on student achievement misses the mark needed to promote the continuous development of the social and emotional maturational skills essential to young adolescents' development.

Systemic

The frameworks are systemic because the components are interdependent across the varied systems within the school setting. In the "content" framework, for example, having a skilled, likable manager with minimal expectations for student success is little better than a tyrant with the same low expectations. Improving school leadership will not make a difference if that leadership does not aggressively support the best practices of educational pedagogy. The strategies throughout the "process" framework are systemic, each interdependent on the other. For example, to build a vision not grounded in the values and beliefs of the faculty or in best practice is a waste of time and energy. To engage but a portion of the faculty in the development of each of the components described in the process is just as futile. Each segment of the school community, and especially all staff responsible for achieving the vision must be engaged in all processes for improvement. While

time and energy are limited, the engagement of all in the discussions and decision-making associated with these essential components are necessary if continuous change is to be initiated and maintained. The processes for change must be continuous, with periodic review of all segments of the process.

Conclusions

This position paper is a synthesis of findings, observations, impressions, and recommendations from MLLC school improvement projects, particularly our work with Project ASSIST (Achieving Success through School Improvement Site Teams) schools from 1996 to the present. To a large degree, ASSIST designs were built upon and support the work of others who have studied school improvement. The designs have also evolved from our research and experiences with ASSIST schools. While our language and our strategies may differ slightly from others, our work confirms the essential ingredients for continuous school improvement described in the literature of learning organizations, professional communities, organizational development, and school change.

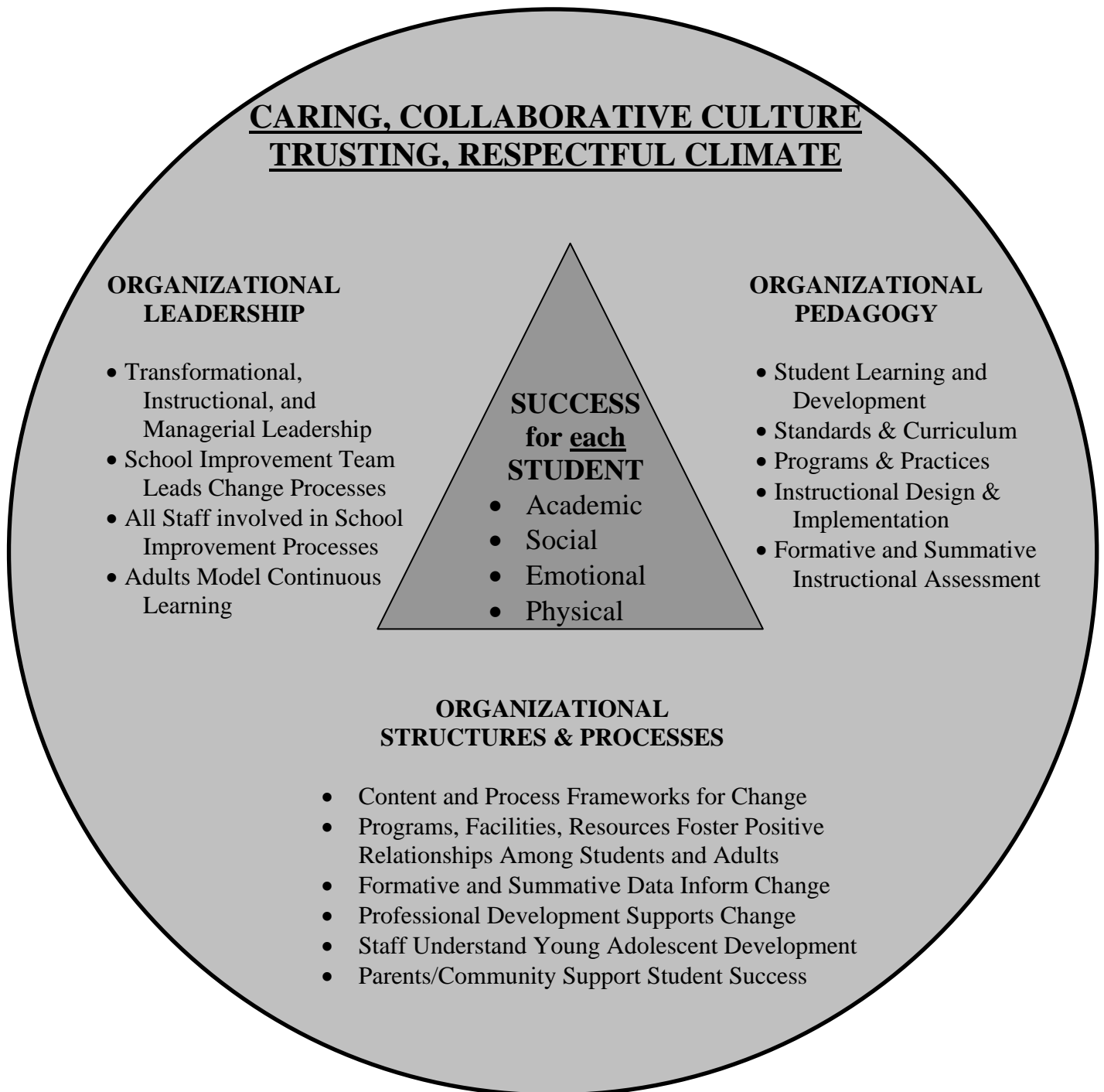
Meaningful change must come from “within” the school and must address both the knowledge of best schooling practices, particularly the knowledge of effective teaching, and the knowledge of organizational change. Mandated change efforts by state or district policies proliferate the educational scene across the United States, but will, over time, make little difference in the lives of students. Change must be vision-driven and “designed” from within the walls of the school. It must become personal to the teachers and administrators of the school. Change must include comprehensive, systemic processes built upon a foundation of shared values and beliefs and a vision of excellence, both of which must be informed by the existing knowledge of best practice. Change is complex and in most schools must be supported by an external resource. Seldom is there adequate expertise within a school to design and implement the essential components of comprehensive, systemic change.

School leaders must, above all else, be transformational while demonstrating both instructional and managerial competence. The leadership that supports change must come from within the school as principals and teachers assume the responsibility of school improvement so each and every student has a successful schooling experience. This form of meaningful, continuous change requires a positive climate established through trusting and respectful relationships among those working and learning together. The leadership, the climate, the processes for change, the commitment to excellence, and the shared values and beliefs of the staff will, over time, shape the culture of the school. Once effectively established, the caring, collaborative culture becomes the support system that permits and promotes the internalization of comprehensive, systemic change. These events take place within the school and must be personalized. The school site, not the district or the state or the nation, must be the locus of change that ensures the success of every student.

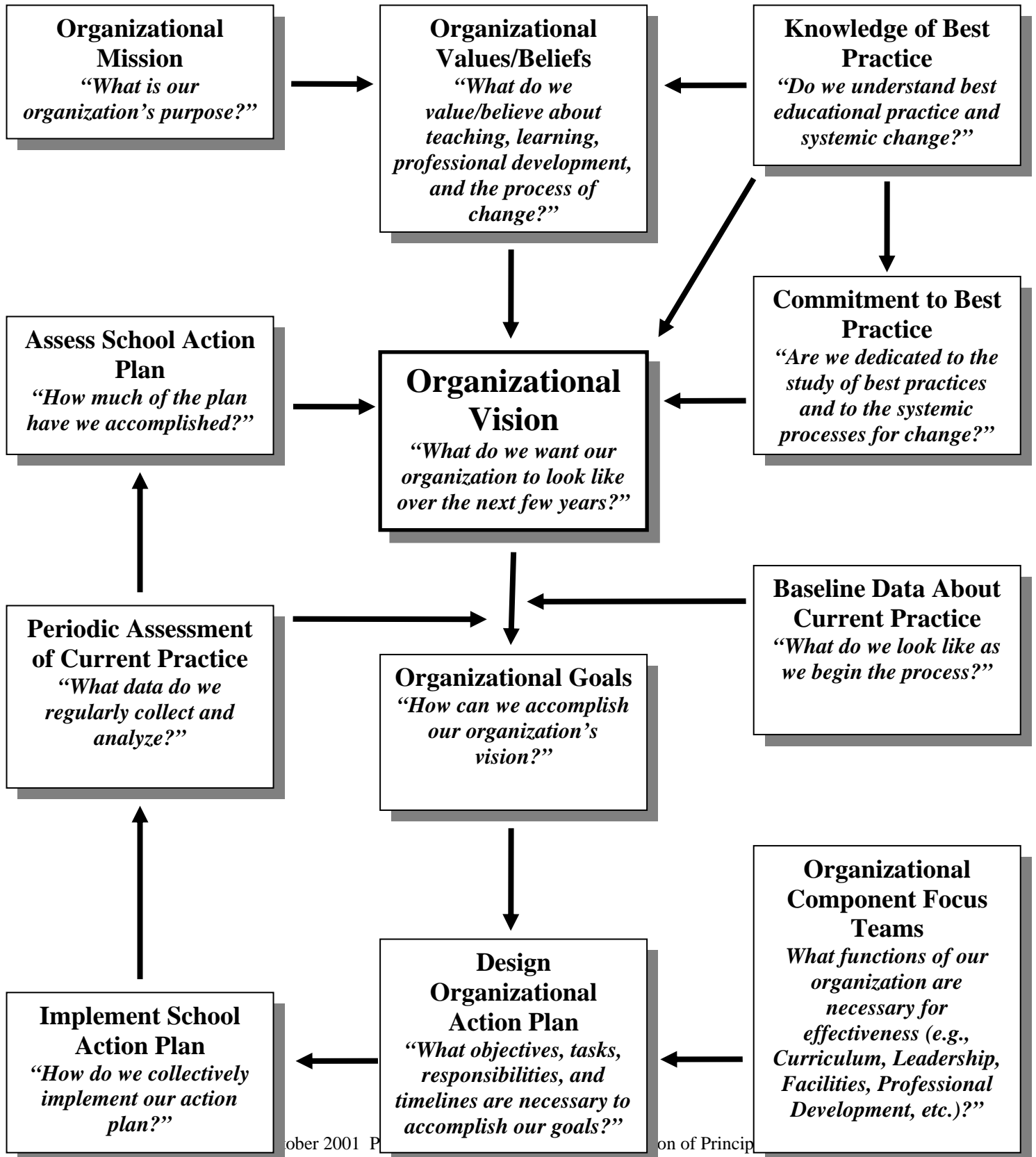
Author’s Note: This position paper was first published in 2001 by Valentine for the MLLC website. The next year the International Confederation of principals selected the paper as a “feature article” and published it in their recommended readings portion of the ICP website http://www.icponline.org/feature_articles/f9_02.htm. The manuscript was then published by request and permission of ICP in the Queensland Primary Principals Journal, November, 2002.

Student-Centered Content Framework for School Improvement

(Attachment A)

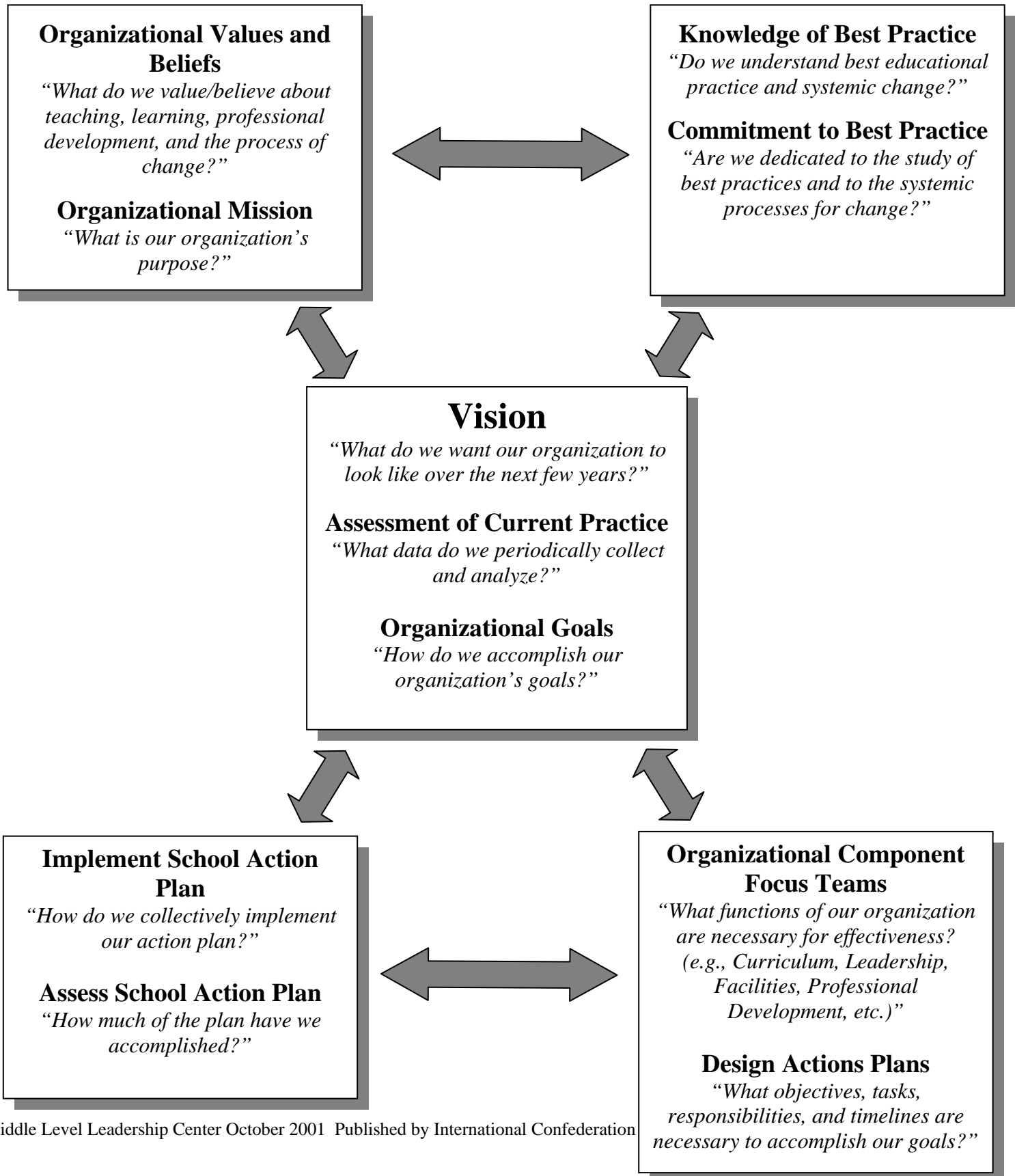


Vision-Driven Process for Initiating School Improvement (Attachment B1)



Vision-Driven Process Framework for Internalizing School Improvement

(Attachment B2)



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