

LEADERS AT  
MANY LEVELS:  
IMPROVING SCHOOLS  
THROUGH COLLABORATION  
IN OHIO

A REPORT FROM  
POLICY MATTERS OHIO

PIET VAN LIER

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## AUTHOR

Piet van Lier is a senior researcher at Policy Matters Ohio. He has a master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri at Columbia and a bachelor's in journalism and political science from Marquette University. Before joining Policy Matters in 2007, van Lier spent seven years covering education for *Catalyst* magazine. In the 1990s, he covered a variety of issues as a freelance journalist based in Cleveland. During that time van Lier also worked extensively as a human rights observer and journalist in Central America and Mexico.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teaching has long been viewed as a hard-to-define skill, something that takes place behind closed doors with a gifted teacher inspiring her students to achieve beyond expectations. Research has shown, however, that students are better served when educators work together, sharing successful practices and helping each other improve.

The results of a Policy Matters interview project show that many public school teachers and administrators in Ohio are ready and willing to open classroom doors. What's needed is state policy that provides the resources and time teachers need to work together to plan lessons, engage in shared learning experiences, and take on leadership roles.

This finding is important as the state legislature considers the school improvement initiatives included in House Bill 1, the biennial budget bill. This bill includes a focus on teacher leadership, innovation and professional development that can provide opportunities to ensure teachers are part of a collaborative effort at the school and district levels. Once this bill becomes law, policymakers planning the implementation of new approaches to school improvement will also have an opportunity to create a system that sees teachers as equal partners.

For this study, Policy Matters interviewed 37 teachers and administrators from 18 school districts. All these districts are engaged in the Ohio Improvement Process, an effort by the Ohio Department of Education to create a unified approach to school improvement.

Our research goal was to review implementation of the state initiative, and to gauge how teachers and administrators are reacting to the effort, which began as a pilot in the 2007-08 school year. Collaboration is at the core of the Ohio Improvement Process.

Our research reveals strong support, among teachers and administrators alike, for the state's requirement that district administrators include teachers and others in data analysis, planning and implementation of plans created under the Ohio Improvement Process. While districts' adoption of such a collaborative approach may be transitory in some cases, the perspectives expressed by administrators and teachers in the course of this study counter a common belief that school reform is best undertaken by a strong or heroic leader (i.e. a superintendent or a principal) with a high level of power and autonomy. Rather, these educators envision a model that engages teachers and others more directly in leadership roles.

A significant majority of teachers and administrators who participated in this study also expressed a critical need for ongoing, job-embedded professional development, broadly defined as opportunities for teachers and other staff to plan lessons together during the school day, share opportunities for professional learning, and work with lead teachers, mentors or instructional "coaches" who can help teachers improve classroom practices.

We strongly support mechanisms that foster collaboration and opportunities for teacher leadership and enhanced student achievement. The results of this study suggest that the Ohio Improvement Process has the potential to do just that, especially in districts without a history of such cooperative efforts and as part of a larger set of policies with a similar

focus. If signed into law, the provision in House Bill 1 to fund lead teacher positions in all schools could prove to be a valuable complement to this state initiative.

At the same time, any effort to create a unified approach to school improvement runs the risk of forcing a “one-size-fits-all” solution on districts facing many different challenges. This is particularly true of the “decision framework,” the data analysis tool that is at the core of the Ohio Improvement Process. Therefore, we recommend a flexible approach that acknowledges widely varying needs at different districts.

At least the beginnings of a culture of cooperation must exist at the district and school level for leaders to use this process to boost student achievement. Many districts seem to be benefiting from the process, but interviews indicate that others lack the basic foundation of trust that’s needed to take full advantage of this effort.

Collaborative professional development, by definition, should always focus on improving student learning. Research indicates that short workshops that are disconnected from what’s happening in the classroom don’t help; efforts over time that bring teachers together around the work they are doing with students are most effective. Good professional development also offers teachers’ unions an opportunity to embrace a leadership role in school improvement efforts.

Among those contacted for this study were representatives of the 16 Ohio school districts in the first cohort of the improvement process. These Cohort One districts began work last year and represent a cross section of rural, suburban and urban school systems around the state. In an effort to include perspectives from the state’s larger districts, five big-city systems, which began the process this academic year, were contacted as well.

As a whole, educators from Cohort One districts reacted positively to the Ohio Improvement Process, with 17 of 24 respondents from these districts giving the effort high marks. Their counterparts in larger urban districts were significantly less likely to view the process so favorably; only three of the 13 urban respondents gave it such positive marks. Based on the interviews, likely reasons for this difference include district size, larger districts’ previous experience with data analysis as the target of intense school improvement efforts, and the different challenges those districts often face from issues such as concentrated urban poverty. Also, Cohort One participation was voluntary, with small grants provided to cover travel and training expenses; other districts are required to use the process and don’t receive the same grants.

Across the board, respondents said participation in the Ohio Improvement Process has been very time consuming. Even most of those who said the process had been positive for their district spoke of “impossible deadlines” and an “unrealistic timeline.” Although the time pressure was considered burdensome, some respondents also acknowledged that it pushed them to complete the process more quickly.

Those with a less positive take on the process, most notably in larger districts or among teacher union leaders who had not been included in the process, questioned its value. In some of the larger districts, the Ohio Improvement Process has duplicated existing district planning and improvement efforts, according to interviews.

## INTRODUCTION

The Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC), which began meeting in 2007, has recommended a move toward “shared leadership” at the district and school level to replace “traditional models of leadership” that relied on one or just a handful of individuals. (OLAC 2008) The advisory group, convened by the Ohio Department of Education and the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, comprises 50 members representing school and district administrators, business leaders, the Ohio Department of Education, teachers’ unions and other stakeholder groups.

Out of the Council’s work to outline practices for superintendents, district leadership teams and building leadership teams came a structure that served as the foundation for *The Ohio Model of Differential Accountability*, which allows the state to vary intervention for low-performing districts and schools depending on assessed areas of need. The U.S. Department of Education approved this exception to No Child Left Behind in 2008 as part of a national pilot program that allows a handful of states flexibility under federal education law.

The Council’s framework also serves as a foundation for the Ohio Improvement Process, which seeks to help districts use data such as standardized test results, attendance and discipline records to drive decision-making at the district and school levels. The process requires school districts to create streamlined plans that focus on just a few goals to boost student achievement and improve school climate.

The four stages of the process are:

- Use the state’s “Decision Framework” tool to analyze data and identify the highest priorities for improvement at the district and building level in collaborative teams of administrators, teachers and at both levels;
- Develop a district-wide plan with a limited number of goals and specific steps to meet them, and align building-level plans with the overall plan;
- Target resources toward identified goals, develop collaborative structures, and work to ensure high quality professional development, including teacher-led training;
- Monitor implementation and evaluate impact on student achievement.

Regionally based consultants guide this work, either from Educational Service Centers or from State Support Teams created to aid in the process. The plan also calls for assistance from State Diagnostic Teams that work with identified high-need districts, as do partners in higher education and regional service providers.

The Ohio Improvement Process calls on local school systems to: work with state-appointed consultants who guide the process; establish district-wide and building-level leadership teams; use an online tool created by Ohio Department of Education staff to sift through data and set priorities; select academic and school-climate goals, and; determine the steps needed to meet those goals.

The process seeks to establish a consistent, unified set of tools and approaches to school improvement that can be used to treat districts and their schools as a whole, rather than addressing district-wide issues separately from those at the building level.

All districts identified under Ohio's differentiated accountability system as low-, medium-, or high-support will be required to participate in the process.

## OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Cohort One districts tended to give higher marks to the Ohio Improvement Process than did their larger, urban counterparts. Most districts found their involvement to be positive in terms of the focus on collaboration, professional development and targeted goals, while even those who spoke enthusiastically about the process said the significant time commitment it required could be overwhelming.

Cohort One participation was voluntary, and those districts received small grants to cover travel and other costs for training, while urban participation was required and no training was provided outside of the guidance provided by state consultants. Reasons for the more negative take also likely include urban districts' long-standing efforts to use data and plan school improvement efforts; meshing existing work with a new mandate caused at least some of the negative responses. (For this study's research methodology, see Appendix A; for a list of school districts included, see Appendix B.)

### **Cohort One**

Seventy percent of the respondents in this group said their experience was generally very positive. Common responses about the process were that it:

- helped focus district plans;
- brought different people with varied perspectives to the table;
- opened up communication, increased collaboration, and;
- was better than previous Ohio Department of Education efforts.

"It's a great process in terms of creating much-needed discussion and collaboration district-wide," said Bill Dressel, director of federal programs at Ironton City Schools. "It has provided us a tool to look at where our strengths and weaknesses are [as well as] a means" to work together as a whole district rather than in separate areas.

Teachers who hadn't been involved in the process have largely accepted goals created by the district leadership team, said Ironton teacher Bob Row, who served on the team. "That's worked out well," he said, explaining his positive take on the Ohio Improvement Process.

"My observation is that it's different from previous efforts from the state," said James Barney, superintendent of Marion City Schools. "There's positive impact because it's not a shotgun, with 45 issues [to address]," he explained. It gives a district a focus and priorities to tackle. Among the primary aims of the Ohio Improvement Process is to get districts and schools to focus on a limited number of achievable goals that will enhance teacher performance and student learning.

The process has helped her district “clarify where we’re going,” according to Alice Ericksen, an elementary teacher in Barberton City Schools. “It has helped us understand a lot more of what’s going on in the district. We’ve used data to set realistic goals,” she said.

Ericksen also expressed concern about the amount of time she and other members of leadership teams had to spend on what she termed a “very difficult” process. Many other respondents gave similar reactions about time required to carry out the process.

“It is very time consuming,” explained Brad Faust, director of curriculum and instruction of Washington Local Schools. “I’m not saying that’s bad, but realistically time is the one thing no one has.” Still, Faust, like many others, said he has an overall positive view of the process. It has helped his district take careful steps to reach decisions based on available data, rather than jumping to solutions about what needs to be done.

Kristen Gregory, a union vice president in West Geauga, said the structure of the Ohio Improvement Process was good in that it drew in people who wouldn’t normally sit down together and helped them look at the “bigger picture.” But the “district timeline is way too condensed and unrealistic as far as what can be accomplished in a year, in terms of what you’re throwing on their plate in addition to teaching” and other responsibilities, said Gregory, who served on both the district leadership team and a building team. “The process needs to be clearer, more streamlined.”

Not surprisingly, three who responded completely in the negative were union leaders who had not been involved in the process. “My opinion is that it’s the same stuff,” said Marion Stolz, union president at Bellaire Local. “Every time someone comes in, you hear the same thing – they come in and tell you what your problems are. We know what our problems are, we don’t need to hear that from them. We need to know what to do to improve.”

Some smaller rural districts seemed to find the process more difficult, even when they saw benefits of being involved. “We’re making progress, I feel we’re headed in the right direction, [but] it’s taking a tremendous amount to do what they’re asking us to do,” explained Bill Buckley, Meigs Local superintendent.

### **Urban perspective**

The view of the Ohio Improvement Process from the state’s largest urbans was decidedly more negative than it is in Cohort One. A few urban respondents saw at least some good or potential for good in the process, while most were more negative. A lack of patience for the latest in a long history of state initiatives came through in some interviews, even as respondents carefully pointed out the positive elements of the current effort.

Much more attention has been focused on school improvement in these districts for many years; in most if not all cases, implementation of the Ohio Improvement Process has meant meshing new plans and structures with existing ones.

This points out the need for a more flexible approach by the state. Urban leaders' responses suggested that while some state consultants have been helpful in trying to adapt the Ohio Improvement Process to urban-district needs, the initiative must be more flexible if it is to prove useful for districts that already have their own systems in place.

The subject of "data fatigue" and bad data came up more often in the urban districts than in Cohort One, suggesting that attention must be paid to ensure that data is as streamlined and relevant as possible.

The view of Laura Mitchell, deputy superintendent in the Cincinnati school district, was completely negative. "For a district that already has a strategic plan, it's a long, pointless process for us to go through," she said. The district already uses data extensively, and "people were saying through the entire thing – why are we doing this," explained Mitchell. "At end of day, it was a matter of cutting and pasting what we already had into a document to meet ODE's needs. The number of hours was just unbelievable."

A teacher respondent in Cincinnati had a more nuanced view. On the one hand, it was interesting meeting with a wide variety of people and hearing different perspectives, said Angel Roddy, a lead teacher who coordinates teacher evaluation. But the time spent could have been used more productively, she explained. "We did not need to do this, we could have done it in a couple of hours. We came full circle," affirming what the district already knew and had been planning.

Even though Cleveland has worked with data extensively for years, the district's chief academic officer, Eric Gordon, said he saw value in the process. "The Decision Framework is a different way of presenting data that we should always be looking at, it captures it all in one place," he explained. "The data are not new; it's just a new way of presenting that thinking." The requirement that more people are involved than would normally be in such a process is helpful, Gordon said.

Because of its size, Cleveland has broken its district-level team into seven smaller, regional teams, five representing K-8 schools and two representing high schools. Size has presented larger districts with challenges many smaller districts don't have to confront.

On the teacher side, Cleveland union president David Quolke said the process is moving in the right direction. It could, however, "be very negative if it's just something that [keeps us] going through hoops," he said. The union was not consulted on teacher representation in the process, although in some cases union representatives at the building level have been included, according to Quolke.

Jan Kilbride, Toledo's chief academic officer, presented a largely positive view of the Ohio Improvement Process even though the Toledo district has been involved with similar work creating professional learning communities in 42 schools. "In terms of reviewing of data, it's a good process; it's generated some good discussions," said Kilbride. "I think it's sometimes a little tedious, because we're splitting hairs," she

explained. When you're a big urban district, "everything is high need," so it can be difficult to select which areas will be given lower priority.

On the teacher side, Deb Sacks, executive secretary and educational issues representative at the union, was more negative. "We really have data fatigue, and that's everyone," explained Sacks. "Every single meeting has consumed an entire day, and it's all data. We're feeling we may have lost an entire year of opportunities" to work on school improvement. "We've just spent too long on this."

In Columbus, the decision framework used to analyze data and select priority goals has not provided new information, according to Jill Dannemiller, director of school improvement and federal programs. "A lot of things that are required (with the Ohio Improvement Process), we are already doing," she explained, including individual school improvement programs, leadership teams and work with consultants.

### SUPPORT FOR COLLABORATION

In the course of this research project, Policy Matters found strong support among teachers and administrators alike for the state's requirement that administrators include teachers and others in data analysis, planning and implementation of plans created under the Ohio Improvement Process. While districts' adoption of such a collaborative approach may be transitory in some cases, the attitudes and perspectives expressed by educators in the course of this study counter a common belief among many reformers that school reform is best undertaken by a strong leader (i.e. a superintendent or a principal) with a high level of power and autonomy. These interviews present a vision for cooperation that recognizes teachers' knowledge of what works in the classroom and the value of getting there together. While there might be other effective ways that some districts have brought about collaboration, interviews suggest that one strength of the Ohio Improvement Process has been its usefulness in creating meaningful discussion beyond traditional leadership roles, particularly in districts where that has not been established.

Collaboration likely meant different things to different people interviewed for this report. Based on analysis of responses, however, two modes of collaboration were in evidence in the districts included in the study. (For the purpose of this study, we have focused our attention on collaboration between teachers and administrators; the Ohio Improvement Process has a broader vision that includes board members, parents and others.)

In some districts, respondents said administrators selected the teachers to participate in the Ohio Improvement Process. It was clear that these districts had little history of teacher involvement in planning and leadership roles that are largely seen as belonging in the realm of central office or school-based administrators.

The collaboration required by the Ohio Improvement Process seemed more likely to be fleeting in such districts. In a number of cases, elected teacher leaders did not know which teachers had been picked by administrators to participate in the state initiative. While respondents who described such a relationship often said that the process had

allowed for constructive dialogue, it remains to be seen whether such dialogue can be sustained absent a structure that either requires it or fosters ongoing opportunity.

Still, meaningful dialogue can happen even if the union does not pick those involved to give the teacher perspective. In a handful of districts, a history of good working relationships based on personal rapport between individuals has allowed for a level of ongoing collaboration. In these cases, the Ohio Improvement Process appears to have tapped into this culture of cooperation and mutual trust. Where such a culture exists, union leaders may willingly concede to administrators a measure of control over teacher appointments; or, conversely, administrators may trust that union leaders' choices to represent the teacher perspective will participate in good faith.

In some of the larger urbans, collaboration is more formalized than in other districts. In these districts, specific mechanisms or programs (such as peer assistance or career ladders) have been written into the collective bargaining agreement in a way that sets up structures for teacher leadership on an array of issues. The urban districts also participate in the Ohio 8, an advocacy organization that brings together the superintendents and teacher union presidents of each of Ohio's eight urban districts.<sup>1</sup> This formalized collaboration, while important, does not guarantee that channels of communication are always open. In some districts, for example, union leaders appointed teachers to the district leadership team required by the Ohio Improvement Process (Cincinnati, Toledo), while in others, union officials were unaware of which teachers had been selected until the process was well underway (Cleveland). When they work, formalized mechanisms should ensure that opportunity for collaboration occurs, even when ongoing communication doesn't.

In the end, from whatever context collaborative efforts grow, they are less likely to succeed unless those involved are willing and able to sit down, listen to and understand the positions the people sitting across the table. Without this willingness to take into consideration others' perspective and plan from common understandings, collaboration will continue to be a meaningless buzzword. This openness rarely happens of its own accord, in any setting let alone in the context of a busy school. Training in collaboration and consensus decision-making are a critical tool if the goal is ongoing, effective communication and partnership focused on raising student achievement.

### **Cohort One**

In many Cohort One districts, the requirement to establish a district leadership team allowed discussion that included a broad range of perspectives, according to interviews.

Sixteen of the 24 respondents from Cohort One districts mentioned the collaboration that is part of the Ohio Improvement Process as having improved the kind of discussions taking place in their school districts or complementing existing collaborative efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown.

The Lima City school district had not had a district leadership team before, according to assistant superintendent Jill Ackerman. Their team represented every area of the district, with input from special education teachers, psychologists, art teachers, physical education. “That’s been all inclusive and that’s been a big bonus,” said Ackerman.

Done well, collaboration fosters trust and strengthens relationships. At Miami Trace Local schools, teachers and administrators are working together much more effectively, according to Stephanie Metzger, a school psychologist. “There is a much greater understanding that it is one system, with students who need varying levels of intervention,” said Metzger. “There’s been a level of trust built through this process so that everybody’s contributions are valued a little more.”

Teachers often did not perceive earlier attempts at collaboration as genuine in Washington Local Schools, according to teacher union president Karen Herrera. “We would have committees to select a new textbook, but many teachers felt that it was already selected.” She had been involved in the process since it began and said that the administration has come to recognize teachers as experts who should be consulted. The new process seemed to have deepened a commitment to true collaboration, she explained. It was still a work in progress, but “it does feel different.”

On the administration side, Washington’s director of curriculum and instruction, Brad Faust, said that bringing administrators and teachers together has strengthened the ability of district staff to sit down and have “an open and honest dialogue.... If we’re truly going to make a difference, if we’re truly going to change, we have to be willing to do that.”

The state’s push to foster collaboration may not improve all districts, but our interviews suggest that it can lead to better communication.

A number of factors may influence the ability of teachers and administrators to work together in a particular district. For the most part, the interest (or lack of interest) of administrators and teacher leaders in engaging around school improvement issues set the tone and potential. Individual teachers may be involved in collaborative efforts even if union leadership is not, but creating a district-wide culture that allows for distributed leadership in an ongoing way likely requires some agreement, whether it’s written or not, between teacher leaders and administrators. If the goal is to create opportunities for collaboration more broadly, training in areas such as consensus decision-making, as mentioned above, will likely be needed to help break down barriers.

When there is no common understanding of collaboration and how it should be structured, different perspectives on what’s happening in the same district can arise.

In Canton City Schools, for example, the teachers’ union president and the administrator interviewed for this study had differing views on the Ohio Improvement Process. Special education director Debbie Wensel spoke positively about the collaborative aspects of the process. “The process has helped them fine tune collaboration at the building level,”

according to Wensel. At the district level, there have been hard but meaningful conversations, she said.

Wensel's positive take on efforts to work together contradicts that of the Pamela Jackson, the local union president, suggesting a conflict that may weaken the ability to implement any decisions that come out of the Ohio Improvement Process. The union isn't represented in the process in Canton, according to Jackson. "Teachers are part of it, but ... they don't represent the union," explains Jackson, who said she doesn't know who the teachers involved on the district- or building-level teams are. "I have asked for that list, but haven't gotten it. It's a very strange thing ... honestly I'm not saying it's done deliberately. There's an assumption that the union's involved, but that's not the case."

### **Urban perspective**

Working together is part of the district culture in Cincinnati, according to deputy superintendent Laura Mitchell. The district has several programs that require collaboration, including local school decision-making committees and instructional leadership teams. "I'm not saying that it's perfect, but we have processes and procedures in place" that are written into the contract, said Mitchell.

Cincinnati teacher Angel Roddy was one of the teacher representatives appointed by the union to be part of the district leadership team. Roddy is serving a three-year stint as a lead teacher – a role created as part of the district's career ladder for teachers – and coordinates the district's Teacher Evaluation System. Even with the district's existing focus on collaboration, the Ohio Improvement Process brought together people who generally would not have been in the same room to discuss data and student achievement, Roddy noted.

Similarly in Toledo, teachers have taken a significant leadership role. "We're very assertive," said Fran Lawrence, Toledo's union president. "Virtually nothing happens in the district where we aren't at least half the committee." The district leadership team in Toledo is made up of 12 teachers picked by the union and 13 administrators, according to Lawrence.

The Toledo district has long had a good conversation between labor and management, agreed Jan Kilbride, the district's chief academic officer. A school committee including the superintendent, the teachers' union president and the head of the administrators' meet on a monthly basis to discuss school improvement, for example. With the new process, this kind of discussion "has been much more expanded. I think it's been a very rich discussion."

Collaboration isn't written into the contract in Akron, according to Charles Glasgow, head of the district's office of school improvement. "We've had a pretty good relationship-building process in Akron ... we're always in communication with the union here," notes Glasgow. The biggest changes and challenges presented by implementing plans from the Ohio Improvement Process will happen in the classroom, he said. "We

have some work to do [there] not only with teachers but with the rest of the administration team that wasn't part of the district leadership team.”

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A significant majority of teachers and administrators who participated in this study saw a critical need for ongoing, job-embedded professional development, broadly defined as opportunities for teachers and other school-based staff to work together to plan lessons, share opportunities for professional learning, and work with lead teachers or instructional “coaches” who can help teachers improve classroom practices. This process can be one effective route to providing that professional development.

Researchers are increasingly seeing the importance of creating opportunities for professional development that are part of the school day and allow teachers to learn together.<sup>2</sup> (For a review of research related to the issues raised in this report, see Appendix C.)

### **Cohort One**

Fifteen of 24 respondents from Cohort One districts said they recognized the importance of creating time for teachers to plan and discuss lessons with each other and saw the need for more opportunities to do so. Also included in the perceived need for stronger support were other opportunities for teachers to engage in long-term professional development, including initiatives such as “learning teams” that allow teachers to meet on a regular basis to discuss classroom practices and curriculum. While many districts already are able to include some level of this kind of collaborative work, most respondents said they saw a need for more.

“We need resources to provide teachers with personal and common planning time,” said James Barney, superintendent of the Marion City Schools. “That is difficult to do, but if we’re going to impact learning, we need to find a way for teachers to have meaningful dialogue. We need to create time for teachers to work collaboratively,” he explained. Karen Herrera, the union president in Washington, made similar comments.

More concentrated effort is needed to help low-achieving students, even in highly rated districts like West Geauga, according to district superintendent Anthony Podojil. “Teachers need time to collaborate, it’s the only way we can make final improvements” to bring struggling students up to speed, he said. For example, every teacher across subject areas who deals with a particular child should get together to discuss what works and what doesn’t for that student, he explained. The district already has “learning communities” for teachers at the high school level, but such collaborative time can be harder to schedule at other grade levels. Referring to the governor’s proposal to add more days to the school year, Podojil said he would rather hire more staff to free up teachers’ time during the day so they can work together.

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<sup>2</sup> Wei, Ruth Chung, Darling-Hammond, Linda, et. al., School Redesign Network at Stanford University, 2009. *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad.*

### Urban perspective

Job-embedded professional development with coaches and teachers leading the way is the key to partnership and collaboration, according to Cleveland union president David Quolke. Teachers can be afraid to use some of the things they learn in professional development, he explained. “We have to create an environment that lets teachers take risks, maybe they’ll be successful [using a new strategy], maybe not.” Furthermore, like other union leaders interviewed for this study, Quolke stressed that while supporting good professional development isn’t just a matter of money, teachers have to be paid for their time.<sup>3</sup>

Reforms that have been identified as successful – such as coaching and extra support in the classroom – need funding to make sure they can be fully implemented, explained Charles Glasgow, Akron’s director of school improvement. “We have some instructional coaches, but not for both literacy and math in every building. The governor’s plan for lead teachers ... that would be fabulous,” he said. “The coaches we do have, have been very successful in modeling classroom behavior that works. The best players and people in the world want coaches.”

In Toledo and Cincinnati, highly collaborative structures are already in place such as learning communities, peer review and career ladders, according to teachers and administrators interviewed. In Cincinnati, the majority of schools are “team-based;” in those schools, teachers meet weekly, both horizontally across subject areas at grade level and vertically, across multiple grade levels. Lead teachers also have roles at the school level.

## IMPACT ON PRACTICES

It is early to gauge impact of the Ohio Improvement Process on student achievement or on what teachers are doing in the classroom. In addition to the increased communication described above, some respondents from the 16 Cohort One districts reported new practices in areas such as professional development and the focus of financial resources.

In Ironton City Schools, “The staff sees why professional development is there, it all comes from data and district-level identification [of goals]. They see that professional development is backing [those goals] up and understand why it’s being offered,” explained fourth-grade teacher Bob Row. In the past “people really didn’t take it very seriously, they didn’t see the value in it.” Because of the state process, Ironton has strengthened professional development, aligning it with academic goals, said Row.

Professional development has changed a lot in Olmsted Falls as well, says fourth-grade social studies teacher Janet Venecek, who also serves as her school’s union representative. Teachers there don’t go out of the district for professional development anymore, unless there is a specific need that can’t be met in-district. This year, the district

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<sup>3</sup> If professional development is scheduled during the day or released time, it is paid, but outside the contractual school day or in the summer, for instance, they often do not get paid. Teachers are more likely to be paid for professional development time in larger urban districts.

has focused on academic standards. “We have gotten several days this year to work on it, with substitutes for a whole grade level” so teachers can do the work together, according to Venecek.

Assistant superintendent Jim Lloyd mentioned that administrators in Olmsted Falls now check in on what teachers are doing more frequently as a result of recent training; principals now do 10 “walk-throughs” each day, while assistant principals do five.

Venecek also said she has incorporated different types of assessments into her teaching. “More students are assessing their own learning,” she explained. “I’ve done a lot with that, and I’m excited” by the results. Venecek related a story about one student who gave himself a C wanted to change it, but wasn’t able to find a way to grade himself higher. “If I had just given him the grade, I don’t think the impact would have been there.”

In Warren City Schools, there is more staff development and teachers are working in teams more often, according to union president Jeff Pegg. An ad-hoc committee that grew out of the district’s involvement with the Ohio Improvement Process now meets once a month, according to the Warren’s director of federal programs, Mark Leiby. Funds are also directed in a more targeted way, he explained. “Instead of running out looking at every new program, we have a new focus through the building leadership team, through professional development, through instruction. That’s where funds are directed.”

Most other Cohort One respondents either said it was too soon because implementation was still underway, or they couldn’t think of specific examples. It was clear that it was too early for urban-district respondents to assess any changes to practices, since their districts had only started the process this year.

Over time, the initiative’s stated focus on data and its requirement for evaluation of results should provide a clear picture of its effectiveness.

## HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

House Bill 1 seeks to create a new Center for Creativity and Innovation in the state education department. The center’s proposed role is to help districts and schools use mentoring and coaching of teachers, create instructional leadership teams that include teachers and other staff, and restructure the learning day or year in an effort to create “professional learning communities.”<sup>4</sup>

HB 1 also provides for the hiring of lead teachers and targets funding for specialty teachers in areas such as art, music and physical education. All of these efforts contribute to the goal of fostering collaboration that taps into teachers as potential leaders of school improvement efforts.

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<sup>4</sup> Amended Substitute House Bill 1 as passed by the House in April:  
[http://www.legislature.state.oh.us/BillText128/128\\_HB\\_1\\_PH\\_N.html](http://www.legislature.state.oh.us/BillText128/128_HB_1_PH_N.html)

Providing paid time for teachers to work together – during common planning time, professional development sessions or with lead teachers or instructional coaches in various settings – requires a significant financial commitment. Where the money comes from depends in part on how a district allocates local funds, as well as state and federal funds that can be used for this purpose.

Costs are also likely to differ by district, since teacher salaries in urban areas, for example, tend to be higher than in rural areas.

Nevertheless, it is possible to give a range of costs for the kind of collaborative work described by educators in this report.

### **Lead teacher or coach**

Under his education reform plan, Gov. Strickland has proposed a lead teacher/instructional facilitator to provide peer mentoring and professional development for each “organizational unit” in a district.<sup>5</sup> Funding to sustain this kind of position in an ongoing way had not previously existed, although districts have tapped into state and federal funds, and private foundation grants that allowed at least temporary staffing of such positions.

Research supports Strickland’s plans, and our interviews reinforced that educators would find this valuable. Many of those interviewed for this study wanted to take this idea one step further; they saw the value and benefits of hiring two such “coaches” in literacy and math for each school.

The cost of adding at least one coach or lead teacher in each school is connected to teacher salaries, which vary significantly from district to district. The state’s average teacher salary in the 2007-08 school year, according to the Ohio Department of Education, was \$53,410. To calculate a rough estimate of the average salary with benefits, Policy Matters added 30 percent to arrive at a figure of \$69,433. Figures provided by ODE for these districts show a range of nearly \$32,000 from the lowest average salary with benefits, in Ironton City Schools (\$53,431), to the highest, in Cincinnati (\$83,238).

Average salary may not be the best indicator of how much it would cost to hire people to fill such positions at each school. Some respondents used the salary level of a 20-year veteran when they spoke of how much it would cost; others mentioned the entry-level

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<sup>5</sup> Under this plan, an organizational unit is defined as a base number of students within a grade band. More than one may exist within the same building, “however they are based on what research says are the ideal size of a school building to achieve effective teaching and learning outcomes.” The plan defines units as follows: grades kindergarten through five – 418 students; six through eight – 557; nine through 12 – 733; districts with fewer than 800 students are treated as one unit. From *Funding a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education System: Ohio’s Evidence-based Model (OEBM)*. The Preliminary Form for School District Payment Line by Line, Fiscal Years 2010 & 2011. Feb. 5, 2009. Retrieved online at: [www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/DocumentManagement/DocumentDownload.aspx?DocumentID=63271](http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/DocumentManagement/DocumentDownload.aspx?DocumentID=63271)

pay it would take to hire an instructional coach's classroom replacement. In an effort to achieve a level of uniformity for calculations in all districts, and to allow some flexibility in cost modeling, using ODE numbers to calculate an average salary with benefits seemed to provide the best overall cost picture while allowing for likely district-to-district variations.<sup>6</sup>

Calculations are further complicated by factors such as the organizational-unit idea proposed by the Strickland administration, which leaves open the possibility that more than one lead teacher could be assigned to a K-8 or a large high school or that three small high schools in one building may share lead teachers.

In districts that already have lead teacher-type positions, they often receive a stipend. For example, in Brunswick, consulting teachers in that district's peer assistance and review program receive a stipend amounting to 15 percent of the district base salary (\$4,895 in 2007-08); similar positions in Columbus and Toledo receive a 20 percent stipend (\$7,355 and \$4,905, respectively). Lead teachers in Cincinnati got \$6,500 extra pay in 2007-08.<sup>7</sup>

### **Common planning time**

Many respondents mentioned time for teachers to plan instruction together on a regular basis as key to their vision for school improvement. Some reported that schools in their district were able to schedule common planning time at certain grade levels but not all. Other respondents reported having lost all scheduled common planning time or having had it reduced due to budget constraints.

The Center for Creativity and Innovation is charged with helping educators figure out ways to create more time for teachers to work together. HB 1 as passed by the House also includes targeted funding for art, music and physical education teachers, as well as librarians/media specialists; ensuring that all schools are sufficiently staffed in these areas could make it easier for districts to schedule common planning time for core academic area teachers (English language arts, math, science, social studies and foreign language). Careful scheduling can allow core teachers to plan and learn together when their students are taking non-core classes.

Salaries with benefits for such positions would be similar to the average salaries noted above, with a state average with benefits at \$69,433, with actual salary levels depending on years of experience and district.<sup>8</sup>

Additional opportunities to schedule common time for teachers can be created by scheduling non-instructional staff to take on responsibilities for lunch, recess or bus duty.

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<sup>6</sup> In April 2009, the Ohio House released a plan that set the base teacher salary at \$49,914, based on the median school district salary with 14 percent added for basic benefits. *Strengthening Ohio's Comprehensive Education Reform Plan*, Ohio House of Representatives, April 16, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Information gathered for previous Policy Matters Ohio study, *Learning from Ohio's Best Teachers: A Homegrown Model to Improve Our Schools*, 2008. Available at [www.policymattersohio.org/LearningFromOhiosBest.htm](http://www.policymattersohio.org/LearningFromOhiosBest.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Under the Strickland/Ohio House plan, librarians/media specialists are to be funded at \$60,000 a year, phased in over an eight-year period.

Such an approach makes economic sense as non-instructional staff are paid less than teaching staff. Aside from its cost effectiveness, this approach allows non-core teachers in subjects like art to plan cross-curricular lessons with core teachers and allows for all classroom teachers to work together as a team.

### **Ongoing professional development**

In addition to establishing the position of lead teacher and specialty teachers, Gov. Strickland's proposed budget as passed by the House provides \$1,833 per teacher in funds for professional development. Since the state share of a district's funding stream varies based on factors such as property wealth, how much state money would be included in the mix if this measure passes depends on each district's state share.

Perhaps equally important, HB 1 outlines a vision of school districts as "thinking and learning organization[s]." This vision, at least in theory, requires a level of collaboration that fits well with the work required by the Ohio Improvement Process. It is important that educators at the district and school level work together to determine their own needs for professional development, and create learning opportunities that allow them to work together to ensure children's learning needs are met.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ohio Improvement Process provides a valuable model for a collaborative approach to school improvement. As with any state initiative, it runs the risk of imposing solutions rather than allowing flexibility for districts with different histories around collaborative work and varied experience with school improvement efforts. However, based on interviews and academic literature, the process seems to have captured a number of valuable features that can help districts and schools enhance teacher effectiveness and student experiences.

At the very least, the initiative seems to have brought a more representative group of teachers, administrators and others to the decision-making process than otherwise would have participated in many of the districts represented in this study.

The process is off to a solid start. Such collaborative efforts, however, must be supported through ongoing training and resources that allow teachers the time they need to plan and learn together. Research suggests that a collaborative approach with a strong component of ongoing professional development can help improve teaching and boost student achievement. (For a brief review of relevant research, see Appendix C.)

It is clear that not all districts have the culture of cooperation and trust between teachers and administrators they will need to take full advantage of this push for school improvement. In these districts, more will have to be done to lay the groundwork to enable meaningful collaboration. Training in areas such as consensus decision-making may be a critical tool to foster communication focused on raising student achievement. Districts around the state have already experienced success with interest-based bargaining, which includes this kind of training – much can be learned from them.

Collaboration aside, respondents from Ohio's larger districts clearly have a more negative view of this process than their counterparts at Cohort One districts. This response indicates a need to allow these districts to adapt the process to their needs.

Included in House Bill 1, the biennial budget under consideration by the state legislature, is a school reform package with key provisions – including lead teacher positions for schools, targeted funding for professional development, and a proposed Center for Creativity and Innovation – that could support the kind of opportunities for teacher leadership that can improve teaching and learning. As policymakers work to implement such reforms, the need to involve teachers as equal partners at the school and district level should be kept at the forefront of the discussion.

## Appendix A

### METHODOLOGY

For this study, Policy Matters conducted a series of interviews for this study with education efforts, including senior staff at the Ohio Department of Education, consultants and staff at Educational Service Centers and State Support Teams, and teachers and administrators at 18 school districts around the state.

Two sets of school districts were selected for the district-level interviews on which this study's findings are based.

First, we attempted to interview at least one administrator and one teacher at each of the 16 school districts that participated in Cohort One of the pilot of the Ohio Improvement Process. Participation in the pilot was voluntary and districts received small grants to pay for expenses such as travel and staff time for training. The state selected two districts in each of 16 regions in order to ensure a measure of geographic representation. State report card ratings for these districts ranged from the second-lowest ranking of Academic Watch, comparable to a grade of "D" (two districts) to the highest, Excellent with Distinction, comparable to an "A plus" (two districts). Enrollment for these districts in the 2007-08 school year ranged from 1,300 to about 10,000 students, and they are a mix of rural, suburban and urban. The pilot began during the 2007-2008 school year.

In the end, Policy Matters interviewed 12 administrators and 12 teachers from 13 of the Cohort One districts. Positions of those interviewed included superintendents and other central office administrators, school principals, teachers, school psychologists and teacher union presidents. Three districts were not included because repeated calls to representatives of the districts were not returned. In some cases, interviews were conducted with as many as three people in some districts and only one in others, based on calls returned.

We also contacted five larger districts – Akron, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus and Toledo – in order to include the experience of the state's largest urban school systems in this study. Enrollment at these districts ranged from 25,000 to more than 50,000 in the 2007-08 school year. Since size and issues such as concentrated poverty present these districts with a different set of challenges for school improvement efforts, it seemed important to include them. State report card ratings for these districts were all Continuous Improvement (comparable to a "C" grade) except for one in Academic Watch. Most Ohio urbans also have significant experience with collaborative improvement efforts and data analysis. These districts began work on the Ohio Improvement Process this year.

Policy Matters interviewed five administrators and eight teachers from the urban districts, including a deputy superintendent, two chief academic officers, three heads of school improvement, teachers, and teacher union leaders. Substantive interviews were conducted with at least one administrator and one teacher each from Cincinnati, Cleveland and Toledo. In Akron, a substantive interview was conducted with an administrator; a planned interview with the teacher union president there never materialized. In Columbus, a brief interview was conducted with the union president, who had little

knowledge of the Ohio Improvement Process and deferred questions to administrators; a brief interview with an administrator provided some information and a referral to more senior officials, who did not respond to repeated attempts to set up an interview.

For a list of school districts selected for this study, see appendix B.

Across both sets of school systems, a total of 37 individuals were interviewed at 18 school districts. Although interviews often took different directions depending on responses and the knowledge of the participant, each was asked the same set of core questions:

1. What do you know about the Ohio Improvement Process and do you see it as positive or negative?
2. What have been some of the positive aspects of the process? What have been some of the negative aspects? What kind of impact has it had so far?
3. What are the goals your district has selected because of this process? (mostly for cohort one districts, which were further along in the process at the time of the interviews.)
4. Describe the support you've received from the state and your interaction with members of the State Support Team.
5. Has the requirement to engage in a collaborative process been valuable and how do you think this will affect collaboration at your district or school in the longer term?
6. How were teachers selected to participate on district or building leadership teams?
7. How has this new effort fit into what your school district was already doing to improve achievement?
8. If Gov. Ted Strickland and the leaders of the Ohio legislature were to walk into your office or school, what would you tell them is most needed to improve schools in your district?

Question eight allowed individuals wide latitude to respond to areas of concern and/or interest. It is largely in response to this question, as well as questions two and five, that administrators and teachers alike expressed the need for high-quality professional development opportunities that allow teachers to work together in a variety of ways.

**Appendix B: State report card and demographic information for districts represented in this study.**

	District	Interviews for this study	State report card information					Student enrollment and demographics							
			State rating	Overall AYP	Value added	Schools Identified for Improvement	Years in School Improvement	Overall Enrollment	Percent black	Percent white	Percent Hispanic	Percent Economically Disadvantaged	Limited English Proficient	Percent with Disabilities	
Cohort One	Barberton City	2	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Met	5	4	3,873	12.5	82.6	1.0	58.9	0.4	15.1	
	Bellaire Local	1	Effective	Not Met	Below	0	4	1,396	4.5	91.7	NC	61.5	NC	22.6	
	Canton City	2	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Below	18	5	10,273	35.8	50.3	1.2	73.5	0.5	16.1	
	Ironton City	3	Effective	Not Met	Below	1	At risk	1,455	7.5	86.9	NC	57.2	NC	18.2	
	Lima City	2	Academic Watch	Not Met	Below	7	5	4,541	41.4	44.4	1.6	75.8	0.5	20.1	
	London City	0	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Below	2	At risk	2,029	5.6	87.4	1.5	30.8	1.0	15.0	
	Marion	1	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Below	9	5	4,908	7.0	86.2	2.6	60.3	1.2	21.0	
	Meigs Local	2	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Below	3	5	1,900	1.3	97.1	NC	67.3	NC	14.7	
	Miami Trace Local	1	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Above	2	At risk	2,593	1.6	94.3	0.7	29.6	NC	15.2	
	North Ridgeville	0	Effective	Met	Met	1	OK	3,655	1.7	90.4	2.5	17.7	0.5	14.9	
	Olmsted Falls City	2	Excellent with Distinction	Met	Above	0	OK	3,491	1.5	93.0	1.8	11.8	0.3	11.8	
	Springfield City	0	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Above	14	5	7,811	25.7	63.8	1.6	66.9	0.9	15.1	
	Warren	2	Academic Watch	Not Met	Below	2	4	5,566	41.4	49.2	1.0	41.3	0.3	18.7	
	Washington Local	2	Excellent	Met	Above	3	3 (Delay)	6,568	8.2	80.6	4.7	39.5	1.7	14.8	
	West Geauga Local	3	Excellent with Distinction	Met	Above	0	OK	2,248	0.6	97.5	0.7	7.4	NC	13.6	
Winton Woods Local	1	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Below	0	2	3,801	67.4	17.6	4.8	33.8	4.2	18.1		
Five largest urbans	Akron	1	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Below	19	4	24,986	48	42.4	1.4	79.7	2	17.5	
	Cincinnati	3	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Met	45	4	33,781	69.4	23.8	1.6	59.9	2.5	20.3	
	Cleveland	4	Academic Watch	Not Met	Below	81	4	50,078	69.8	15.7	11.4	83.7	5.3	20	
	Columbus	2	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Met	80	4	52,894	61.7	27.4	5.6	98.1	8.6	15.7	
	Toledo	3	Continuous Improvement	Not Met	Below	50	2	27,200	46.2	40.9	8.1	55.2	1.8	18.6	
Source: All district data from the Ohio Department of Education.															
<b>Overall AYP</b> is adequate yearly progress, the measure of school improvement under federal education law (No Child Left Behind).															
<b>Value added</b> is a measure of growth in student achievement based on student scores matched over time; this column shows if a district has met, exceeded or fallen short of goals.															
<b>Schools identified for improvement</b> are schools that have not met AYP for more than two years.															
<b>Years in school improvement</b> shows how many years a district has not met AYP.															

## Appendix C

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that improving the teaching that happens in the classroom is a significant factor in raising academic achievement. Education researchers have found that to be effective, professional development cannot be a short-term workshop or seminar that is disconnected from what's being taught in school. It has to be an ongoing effort that is focused on specific subject matter and is aligned with classroom goals and curriculum materials teachers are using. Unfortunately, much professional development available to teachers is offered in shorter, disconnected workshops of the type that researchers see as least effective. (Hill, Heather C. *Learning in the Teaching Workforce*. The Future of Children, 2007.)

Diane Freidlaender and Linda Darling-Hammond report that in most nations with high-achieving schools, government support provides 10 to 20 hours a week for teacher planning and collaboration and up to four weeks each year of professional development time. A study of five urban high schools in California that “do an extraordinary job of preparing their students for success” found that these schools raised extra money and adjusted schedules and staffing to provide such professional development opportunities. (Friedlaender, Diane and Linda Darling-Hammond, et. al. *High Schools for Equity: Policy Supports for Student Learning in Communities of Color*. The School Redesign Network at Stanford University and Justice Matters, 2007.)

Additionally, studies on teachers' belief that as a group they can raise student achievement show that “collective teacher efficacy was positively associated with differences between schools in student-level achievement in both reading and mathematics.” (Goddard, Roger D., Wayne K. Hoy and Anita Woolfolk Hoy. *Collective Efficacy Beliefs: Theoretical Developments, Empirical Evidence, and Future Directions*. Educational Researcher, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 3-13, 2000.)

The looming retirement of Baby Boomers and the increasing turnover among younger teachers necessitates a new approach to development of the teaching workforce, according to The National Council on Teaching and America's Future. In the face of this transformation of the workforce, learning teams that allow experienced teachers and beginners to work together could be an essential element to improving student learning. (Carroll, Thomas G. and Elizabeth Foster. *Learning Teams: Creating What's Next*. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2008.)

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3631 PERKINS AVENUE, SUITE 4C - EAST • CLEVELAND, OHIO 44114 • 216/361-9801

COLUMBUS: 300 E. BROAD STREET, SUITE 490 • COLUMBUS, OHIO 43215 • 614/221-4505

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