

LEADERS AT MANY LEVELS :
*IMPROVING SCHOOLS THROUGH
COLLABORATION IN OHIO
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.

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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.

Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute dedicated to researching an economy that will work better for all in Ohio. Learn more about Policy Matters Ohio at www.policymattersohio.org.