Raising Achievement in Michigan Schools:

Lessons from the 2012-14 Statewide System of Support

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Introduction

From 2012-2014, the Michigan State University Office of K-12 Outreach, in collaboration with the Michigan Department of Education (MDOE), the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA), and other partners, created the MI Excel Statewide System of Support (SSoS). The SSoS project was federally funded through MAISA, and was overseen by the Michigan Department of Education School Reform Office (SRO). This project was a radical departure from previous school aid projects in Michigan because it provided widespread and coordinated expert support to schools designated as "priority" and "focus" schools. This support was tailored to the specific needs of the school and/or district.

Priority schools were defined at that time as the lowest achieving 5% of Michigan schools in terms of overall student achievement. Priority schools often had proficiency levels on the state standardized test lower than 20%. Many had 0% student proficiency. These schools were in need of an intensive intervention designed to improve teaching and learning. As part of the SSoS, MSU K-12 Outreach hired and trained dozens of intervention specialists to help districts "identify opportunities for transformation and growth, whether at the school or in the central office" and to help educators in these schools attain skills and implement data-based systems that would result in higher student achievement. These intervention specialists were skilled educators with excellent track records in helping students thrive regardless of their demographics.

Focus schools were the 10% of all Michigan schools that had the largest achievement gaps between their top 30% students and their 30% lowest-achieving students. Support for focus schools was much less intensive and focused primarily at the district level and addressed achievement gaps among typically underserved students: English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and students with disabilities. Interventions with focus schools emphasized the collection, analysis and discussion of data and develop multi-tiered systems of support to ensure that all students receive appropriate support and interventions tailored to their needs.

I joined the MSU Office of K-12 Outreach as the director of communications in July of 2013. I was responsible for overseeing and coordinating all aspects of MI Excel communications project, including MI Toolkit, an online resource for both priority and focus schools and district personnel who participated in the program. In January of 2013, the Office of K12 Outreach applied for funding through MAISA to continue the program throughout the next grant period. MAISA and MDOE decided to go in a different direction with the SSoS, and the MSU involvement was suspended and the specialists were pulled from the field. As part of the final report that was submitted in March of 2015, I was tasked with overseeing a research project designed to ascertain "lessons learned" by interviewing the intervention specialists and district improvement facilitators who worked in the targeted schools.

From August through December 2014, I worked with the MSU K-12 Outreach team to conduct dozens of hours of interviews with MSU MI Excel specialists who worked with hundreds of Title I Priority and Focus schools. After the interviews were completed, I spent three months listening to these interviews to draw out the common themes and identify "lessons learned." This article represents their collective experiences in helping schools and districts put in place the systems, processes, culture, and people necessary to raise achievement and eliminate gaps.

This collective experience in working with Priority and Focus schools produced a deep understanding by all involved about what differentiates schools that successfully and dramatically improve student achievement from those that don't: strong, effective leaders at the school and district levels; skilled, committed teachers in every classroom; and a positive, collaborative culture of high expectations for all students. But the work done in this program has also demonstrated that getting these components in place is complex work, filled with nuance and circumstances that are unique to each school and district. This means that while much of the approach to improving student achievement is similar (e.g., a focus on data), the work must be tailored to the context of each school and district, and take into account the assets, capacities and challenges they bring to the reform effort.

What follows are some of the lessons learned over the past two years. Many of them anecdotally echo and reinforce the vast amount of research on what makes schools effective.

➤ Leadership at the building level is critical.

Without exception, every one of our 30 specialists listed leadership as critical to improvement in Focus and Priority schools. In Priority schools, principals need to have "turnaround competencies," the specific skills, knowledge and dispositions that can deal with the complexity of issues struggling schools face. One specialist added, "School leadership has to be 'willing to rock the boat,' change things up, and not remain devoted to the status quo." This extends to the school leadership team as well. According to one specialist, one Priority school was able to make great progress because of the principal's "extraordinary capacity to bring the staff together with a purposeful focus on student achievement. Her ability to promote shared leadership developed the capacity of the staff and brought them personally into the improvement process."

Focus schools that were successful in narrowing achievement gaps had leaders who accepted the focus designation as a "wake-up call" and were able to rally staff to embrace a new approach to educating the students who comprise the bottom 30%.

➢ **A school's level of success in raising achievement and eliminating gaps is influenced greatly by district action (or inaction) in providing systemic support.**

One specialist said it particularly well: "Schools were most successful when the district bought into the focus and/or priority work and involved all their schools in the data dialogue process, even the ones who weren't designated a MI Excel school. This approach gave the work consistency across the district, and provided schools common ways to work with data and identify struggling students."

Part of the MI Excel work at the district level involved using a tool developed by Education Resource Strategies (ERS). This tool, called the Resource Check, enabled districts to assess whether their limited resources are aligned with their academic goals. This systemic approach was successful when districts used the information drawn from this exercise to realign their resources to the strategies known to make significant differences in teaching and learning. According to one specialist, for one district she worked with, "the use of ERS protocols and routine shed light on a number of challenges in the school and district, and the leadership team was willing to acknowledge the need for improvement after embracing the data presented."

> **"Just as the district can facilitate positive change in a school, it can also inhibit or block it entirely."**

Just as the district can facilitate positive change in a school, it can also inhibit or block it entirely. In focus schools, if the district refused to recognize the state metric and resulting focus designation, it was unlikely that the focus school would receive the support it needed to close achievement gaps. In priority schools, district systems and a lack of resources were the most common culprit to providing school-level support. One example of a district barrier is when school staffing decisions are made at the district level. According to one MI Excel specialist, "The importance of being able to select staff cannot be overstated; it makes a crucial difference to the school culture, especially at the beginning of the turnaround journey." Another district barrier involves the consistency of staffing at the school and district levels.

➢ **Instability in leadership and staffing inhibits a school's ability to make and sustain the changes needed to support improved achievement.**

Struggling schools need consistency and stability. They cannot make progress with a revolving door of staff and administrators. This was borne out time and time again in priority and focus schools. According to a specialist, "What you find, and it tends to be urban districts, is constant change; [schools] don't have a stable environment to really implement something with consistency and fidelity. It's always a new program, a new leader, a new teacher, a new issue. Without that stability, it's tough to make these types of changes."

Leadership stability at the school and district levels was key to a consistent, sustained approach to change. "When a principal quits or disengages from the improvement process, the entire structure shuts down," said another specialist. Some schools had three principals in as many years, which placed the school in a constant state of starting over. This is particularly critical for priority schools. "When a new principal arrives," one specialist explained, "it generally takes a while for the new leader to get to know the climate and culture and that is lost time for turnaround implementation."

In terms of staffing, struggling priority and focus schools often faced a laundry list of issues that made it difficult for them to attract and retain skilled teachers. Rural schools and their communities often faced a lack of resources that restricted the kind of salaries they could offer, so turnover was high. Large urban districts often struggled with an ensconced bureaucracy and/or rigid union rules that had strict requirements on how teachers were assigned. This often resulted in a significant number of new teachers in a school every year. In some charter schools, low pay and poor benefits contributed to high staff turnover. "Dramatic and timely progress would be much more likely if priority schools were assigned highly qualified, experienced teachers, and those teachers were retained at these schools for several years. This would increase consistency and stability, and increase the capacity of the school to improve student achievement," offered one specialist.

➤ Data, data, data.

Schools that successfully raised achievement and closed achievement gaps focused on multiple forms of data. One specialist explained that exploring data reduced anxiety about teachers being "blamed" for low student achievement: "The use of data for instructional improvement was often a rallying point for both administrators and teachers." Specialists found that when they were able to engage leaders and staff in their own the data, they were able to take ownership of the story the data told. "When we put good data in front of teachers and walk them through the process of disaggregating the data, they can be key in identifying areas of concern. We have to slow down and have rich dialogues about the data and the process, as well as to monitor implementation," added another specialist. And when staff members were able to "put faces on the data," they were able to make the leap to student-centered learning. "When the conversation moved from teaching to learning," a specialist observed, "then I knew that we were beginning to make a difference."

Using data requires time, something that was in short supply for most schools. The most successful schools found creative ways to give staff the time they needed. A focus on data is essential to moving all students toward success, said a specialist, adding: "The key to the use of data in increasing students' academic performance lies in both individual and collaborative effort of staff members to understand, analyze and use pertinent information in designing energetic, meaningful, and effective lessons."

➤ Initiative Overload.

Many schools suffer from initiative overload. As one specialist observed, "There's a tendency in these schools to try to do too many initiatives instead of focusing on one or two and doing them well… that's a key thing we have to work on in all of our schools. Schools tend to jump from issue to issue looking for the next silver bullet." Nearly every specialist observed this same phenomenon at some point in their work with priority and focus schools. A laser-like focus on the data was the best defense to initiative overload by enabling schools to make instructional and programmatic decisions based on the needs of their students, and then monitor their implementation and results.

➢ A balance between pastoral care and academic press.

There were several schools that exemplified the potential for change when pastoral care for students and families is at the forefront of school improvement efforts. As their specialist observed, "Helping students deal with their own personal challenges improve student connections to the school, and facilitating this support throughout the entire staff means that the likelihood of a student-to-adult connection can be increased." But while pastoral care is very important, a similar emphasis needs to be placed on academic achievement. A few schools that provided excellent social and personal supports and a caring and supportive climate and culture for students were hesitant to stress academics. But the poor academic achievement of the students in these schools was evidence of the need for balance between pastoral care and academic press. "There needs to be a balance with academic structure, curriculum and rigor," said one specialist. One way to do this is to involve students in their own data. Many schools have adopted a system where students track their own data in notebooks. This gives them ownership of their data…and their learning. In some schools, students knew where they were in every subject in relation to where they needed to be.

Summary

Michigan's Title I Priority and Focus schools, taken as a whole, made significant progress over the two years that the Statewide System of Support had been in place. Many schools were able to emerge from their status by embracing their designation, accepting the supports MI Excel offered, and utilizing data to identify and address student needs. It was difficult, complex, sometimes frustrating, but always rewarding for the MSU specialists who mentored and guided school and district leaders and staff as they worked to improve teaching and learning in their schools.

There is much left to be done. Michigan still languishes near the bottom of U.S. states in achievement. Many schools still struggle with internal and external factors as they work to improve teaching and learning, and limited resources promise to be a reality for public education for the foreseeable future. Low expectations still challenge many educators, and some just don't believe that every child can learn. But the seeds of change have been sown and there is growing momentum as schools and districts focus on data and create learning environments that foster authentic learning for all the students they serve. As we look to the future, Michigan's Title I Focus and Priority schools can and will continue to improve if they are committed to ensuring that every child reaches his/her potential and have continued and consistent systemic support until they have the tools, processes, skills and dispositions necessary to sustain positive change.

A specialist perhaps said it best. "To do our work, to help these schools build capacity around data analysis and data interpretation and use that data to drill down to instructional practices does not, in and of itself, bring about stability for schools, particularly Priority schools. What it does is give them is great momentum for change. And the better they get at it, the more change is going to come. It's our job to ensure they can help themselves after we step away."