Creating a Theory of Action for Improving Teaching and Learning

This is an abbreviated version of a 10-page tool. For the complete tool, click:
http://info.k-12leadership.org/creating-a-theory-of-action

WHAT THIS TOOL WILL HELP YOU DO. This tool is designed to provide additional guidance to principals and principal supervisors as they work together to develop problems of student learning and contributing problems of teaching and principal practice. This tool ensures that the teaching and leading problems of practice are grounded in a clear analysis of what is working and not working for students. The tool also helps the principal and principal supervisor use the analysis to generate a theory of action, or an evidence-based story, that explains the specific changes they intend to make to improve teaching and learning.

This tool will help to:

1. Develop a well-elaborated conception of the problem or situation for students, teachers, and leaders that motivates their actions in the first place.

A good theory of action does not simply elaborate which actions to take. Too often leaders jump immediately to actions without fully examining or otherwise appreciating what is happening for students and adults. As a result, sometimes there is an investment of considerable time, funding, and other resources in particular activities before we realize that what we have set out to do won't actually get us where we want to go. If we had only suspended action and carefully examined what is happening in our settings, we might not have embarked on the wrong course.

2. Make your leadership the core of the theory of action.

This tool prompts the principal and principal supervisor to consider not merely problems in general but problems of *practice* — problems in what people throughout the sytem do day-to-day and how they think about their work — that contribute to results for students.

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3. Create an evidence-based rationale for all parts of the theory.

There's no shortage of problems and improvement strategies in schools. But which problems are most pressing? Which problems are actually problems? Which strategies might actually work to address a particular problem? A theory-of-action approach to change views exploring these questions as fundamental to charting a promising course for improvement. And exploring these questions requires relentless articulation of your rationale for your claims about problems and "solutions" and the continuous scrutiny of evidence to support your claims.

4. Identify the supports needed to make the identified changes in principal practice.

For example, if it is determined that the principal needs to provide high-quality feedback to teachers during classroom observations, what kinds of supports might the principal need to engage in those activities? If it is determined that teachers need to differentiate instruction effectively, what other conditions besides principal feedback matter to teachers taking those actions? If you claim that teachers differentiating instruction will impact student achievement in reading, consider what other conditions affect student achievement beyond what teachers do and identify those. The tool will walk you through these questions.

Theories of action take time and never reach a final state. Rather, they are living documents that need to be revisited and refined as principals and principal supervisors take action, collect evidence, and consider changing conditions.

The tool offers principal supervisors a framework for gauging principals' instructional leadership capacities combined with an instrument for gathering evidence of individual strengths and weaknesses over multiple contacts. Such knowledge is the necessary foundation for continuing work with each principal differentiated for that principal's needs. Critical examination of evidence about principals' leadership, conducted as work, also helps model the use of evidence about teaching and learning for their principals and others throughout the system.

Want the complete, step-by-step tool?

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