Creating a Theory of Action for Improving Teaching and Learning

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.

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.

Theory of Action 1: A First Pass

To begin, spend some time studying the theory of action graphic on the next page. To help you keep the big picture in mind as you begin the process, the image shows the connections that exist between the key players in the district: principal supervisors, principals, teachers and students.

Since the ultimate concern is improving student learning, you'll note that the graphic encourages the principal and principal supervisor to begin deriving their theory of action not by jumping directly to perceived problems with teaching or leadership, but by focusing first on specific problems of student learning. It works backward from there, analyzing how current practice, from teaching back through principal leadership, is part of a chain of causality that produces the results in student performance that you see. This process yields a simple way to state a theory of action to undergird your work: *"If the principal does X, then teachers will be able to do Y, which will help all students to learn at higher levels."*

Creating Your Theory of Action for Improving Teaching and Learning

SCHOOL
Principal

CLASSROOMS
Teachers

Students

TEACHING / LEARNING / ACCOUNTABILITY

Start with your students!

3

How is principals' practice affecting our teachers' instruction? What are principals doing (or not doing) as instructional leaders that's helping or hindering teachers' instructional performance?

What needs to change?

2

How is teachers' instruction affecting student learning? What are teachers doing (or not doing) in their instruction that's helping or hindering students' performance?

What needs to change?

1

What's going on with our students' learning?

What needs to change?

THEORY OF ACTION STORY (constantly being tested, revised, and refined):

"IF the principals do X ⟶ **then teachers will be able to do Y** ⟶ **which will help all students learn at higher levels."**
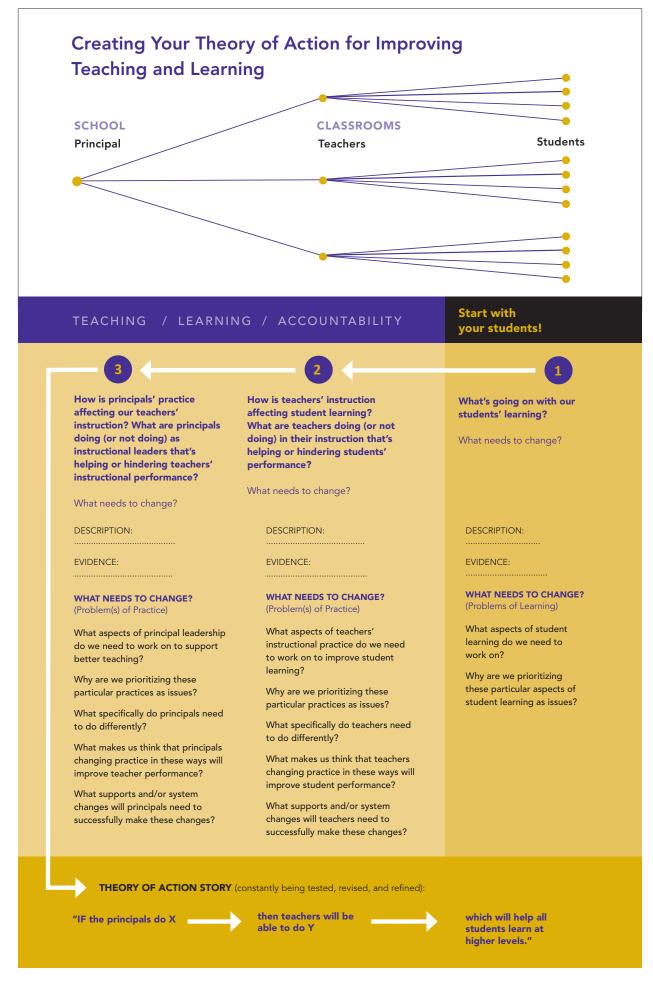
Now, to get started with a first rough draft theory of action, work through the table below, starting at the right and working down through each column before moving to the left. Then use your answers to rough out a basic theory of action at the bottom of the table. Your initial theory can be simple and impressionistic, just to give you a feel for the logic and the bare bones of your story. After you complete this beginning exercise, it's important to continue on to the more detailed questions on the following pages, which will help you drill down into the causality and conditions for success in each part of the system in much more depth, giving your theory more power and accuracy.

③ Principals	② Teachers	START HERE ① Students
3a. How is principal's practice affecting teachers' instruction? What is the principal doing (or not doing) as an instructional leader that's helping or hindering teachers' instructional performance? Impressions and observations:	**2a. How is teachers' instruction affecting student learning? What are teachers doing (or not doing) in their instruction that's helping or hindering students' performance?** Impressions and observations:	**1a. What's going on with our students' learning?** Impressions and observations:
3b. What needs to change in principal practice to better support teachers' instructional performance?	**2b. What needs to change in teacher practice to better support student learning?**	**1b. What needs to change in our students' learning?**
If the principal …..	**then teachers will be able to ……**	**so that students will be able to ……..**

Theory of Action 2: Taking It Deeper

While your first broad-brush theory gives you a good starting point for discussion, it will not yet be detailed enough or sufficiently grounded in the evidence to give you a solid basis for effective action. To take your thinking to the next (deeper) level, take some time to look at the expanded theory of action graphic on the next page.This version includes more probing questions about your evidence for your claims about what's going on in leadership, teaching, and learning in your school, why you are prioritizing particular issues as problems, and what you think will help to remedy those problems and why. After looking over the graphic, continue to the prompts on student learning, teaching practice and principal leadership that appear on the following pages.

Note that working your way through all of these questions will be, and should be, a much longer process than your first-take theory of action discussion. As you make your way through the process, there may be identified areas where you need to collect more evidence (looking at student data, conducting classroom walkthroughs, or having conversations with key school-based personnel) or to consult the research on effective practice before your theory can be solidified. You don't need to hold back from sketching out your theory until you fill in all such gaps (you will be revisiting it frequently in any case). But do note areas where you need more information.

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3

How is principals' practice affecting our teachers' instruction? What are principals doing (or not doing) as instructional leaders that's helping or hindering teachers' instructional performance?

What needs to change?

DESCRIPTION:
....

EVIDENCE:
....

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?
(Problem(s) of Practice)

What aspects of principal leadership do we need to work on to support better teaching?

Why are we prioritizing these particular practices as issues?

What specifically do principals need to do differently?

What makes us think that principals changing practice in these ways will improve teacher performance?

What supports and/or system changes will principals need to successfully make these changes?

2

How is teachers' instruction affecting student learning? What are teachers doing (or not doing) in their instruction that's helping or hindering students' performance?

What needs to change?

DESCRIPTION:
....

EVIDENCE:
....

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?
(Problem(s) of Practice)

What aspects of teachers' instructional practice do we need to work on to improve student learning?

Why are we prioritizing these particular practices as issues?

What specifically do teachers need to do differently?

What makes us think that teachers changing practice in these ways will improve student performance?

What supports and/or system changes will teachers need to successfully make these changes?

1

What's going on with our students' learning?

What needs to change?

DESCRIPTION:
....

EVIDENCE:
....

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?
(Problems of Learning)

What aspects of student learning do we need to work on?

Why are we prioritizing these particular aspects of student learning as issues?

THEORY OF ACTION STORY (constantly being tested, revised, and refined):

"**IF the principals do X** → **then teachers will be able to do Y** → **which will help all students learn at higher levels.**"

1. Student Learning

What's going on with our students' learning?

A. <u>DESCRIPTION OR ANECDOTE</u>: Which student in our school best captures what most concerns us about student learning? What specifically is happening for that student? For example, what does a typical day look like for that student in terms of his or her learning experience? How prevalent do we think these issues are?

B. <u>EVIDENCE/TREND DATA</u>: What evidence of student performance do we have that substantiates our concerns above? (E.g., performance data, observations/rounds/walkthroughs, and/or conversations/surveys with teachers, parents, and students)

C. Given our observations and the evidence above, what aspects of student learning do we need to change? What is the student learning problem?

D. Why are we prioritizing these particular aspects of student learning as issues?

E. What changes in teacher practice or other instructional resources do we think will make a difference in student learning?

2. Teaching Practice

How are our teachers' instruction affecting our students' learning?

What are teachers doing (or not doing) in their instruction that's helping or hindering students' performance?

A. <u>DESCRIPTION OR ANECDOTE</u>: Which one teacher in our school best captures what most concerns us about the quality of teaching given the issues we see in student learning? What specifically does that teacher do in their practice that concerns us? For example, what might that teacher be doing during a typical math lesson in terms of how s/he interacts with students?

B. <u>EVIDENCE/TREND DATA</u>: What evidence do we have (or could we collect) that substantiates the problem that this teacher represents—for example, how prevalent that kind of teaching is among which teachers in which schools, and how it's affecting student performance?

C. Given the issues we see in student learning, what aspects of teachers' instructional practice do we need to change to improve student learning? What is the teaching problem of practice?

D. Why are we prioritizing these particular practices as issues?

E. What specifically do teachers need to do differently? What is the teaching problem of practice?

F. What makes us think that teachers changing their practice in these ways will improve student learning?

G. What supports and/or system changes will teachers need to make these changes successfully?

3. Principals

How is principal practice affecting our teachers' instruction? What is the principal doing (or not doing) as an instructional leader that's helping or hindering teachers' instructional performance?

A. DESCRIPTION OR ANECDOTE: After looking at principal self assessments and other evidence gathered, what are specific areas for growth and improvement?

B. EVIDENCE/TREND DATA: What evidence do we have (or could collect) that could help you understand the area for growth?

C. Given the issues we've identified in teacher performance, what aspects of principal leadership do we need to change? What is the principal problem of practice?

D. Why are we prioritizing these particular practices?

E. What specifically does the principal need to do differently? What is the principal's area of focus?

F. What makes us think that principals changing their practice in these ways will improve teacher performance?

G. What supports and/or system changes will the principal need to make these changes successfully? What resources will be required?

Theory of Action 3: Putting It All Together

Once you've finished working through the questions above sequentially, you'll want to consider your responses to all of them simultaneously, working back from the issues for student learning on the right all the way to principal practice, structures, and systems on the left as shown in the graphics. In your discussion, highlight the relationships between the issues you've identified. In particular, it will be helpful to focus on your answers to question C, "What needs to change?," in each area in order to promote effective instructional leadership, teaching practice, and student achievement. Provided that you've developed a solid rationale for what needs to change in each case, by capturing your answers to that question, you should now be able to generate a revised theory of action that goes deeper than your first:

REVISED THEORY OF ACTION:

if the principal ...	then teachers will be able to	so that students will be able to

As mentioned, even this revised theory of action will be subject to continual reassessment and revision as you lead, teach and learn your way through the work of improving instructional leadership in support of improved student learning. Even now, looking at your answers to questions B (about evidence) and F ("what makes us think this will work?"), it may be clear to you that you need to gather stronger evidence or consult more research in order to back up parts of your theory.

Questions you might consider as you look ahead from here to develop an action plan include:

1. How will we fill in any current gaps in our evidence or research base as we look at our theory of action?

2. How will we use our theory of action? Which audiences do we need to need to engage in dialogue with about our theory of action and why?

3. What are the most important things that we need to convey to these audiences about our theory of action and the need for change? In what ways do we need their support?

4. What process will we follow to regularly revisit and update our theory of action, either formally or informally, as our work moves forward over the coming months and years?