MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
THE OFFICE OF K-12 OUTREACH
MODEL FOR
SYSTEMIC SCHOOL REFORM
Since 1997, Michigan State University K-12 Outreach has been an integral part of MSU’s efforts to improve educational opportunities in Michigan schools. In order to strengthen MSU’s mission of public service, then-provost (now University President) Lou Anna Simon and College of Education Dean Carole Ames (now emeritus) created the Office of K-12 Outreach. Since that time, the Office of K-12 Outreach, under the leadership of founding director and Assistant Dean Dr. Barbara Markle, has been a major force in school reform efforts in the state of Michigan. Through the continued support of the College of Education under Dean Robert Floden, MSU K-12 Outreach has remained steadfast in its commitment to connect research with practice in Michigan schools. During her tenure, Dr. Markle has brought together researchers, administrators, and policymakers in a spirit of collaboration to better understand the latest in a series of policy reforms, as well as drawing from the best practices in other countries. MSU K-12 Outreach has provided essential leadership development services to policymakers, superintendents, principals, and teachers through the various incarnations of its Emerging Leaders, Coaching 101, Policy Forums, International Study Tours, and Fellowship of Instructional Leaders programs - training thousands of leadership and instructional coaches, school and district leaders, and teachers. MSU K-12 Outreach has also been an important partner of Michigan’s professional education associations and a founding member of the Education Alliance of Michigan.

However, the core of MSU K-12 Outreach’s mission has been support for disadvantaged schools. From its beginning, Markle’s team has had a sharp focus on the pressing challenge of providing educational opportunities to high-needs students. Most notably, MSU K-12 Outreach’s Michigan Department of Education (MDE) funded MiExcel initiative provided direct support to Michigan’s Title I “priority” schools (bottom 5%), as well as those districts with “focus” schools (those with the largest achievement gaps). MSU K-12 Outreach also partnered with the Skillman Foundation’s “Good Schools” program to help underachieving Detroit schools, and most recently is providing extensive technical assistance to the Flint Community Schools as it goes through a major district-wide reform effort, funded by the C.S. Mott Foundation. MSU K-12 Outreach has supported state-sponsored efforts in Michigan to improve educational standards and the use of technology. In all of this work, MSU K-12 Outreach deployed a team of faculty experts and veteran educators with deep experience in Michigan schools – and urban, high-poverty schools in particular.

Among the fruits of MSU K-12 Outreach’s decades-long involvement with Michigan schools are some hard-won insights about effective ways to improve those schools. Anyone who works in the area of school reform is aware of its challenges and complexity, and there is a very strong temptation to cut through those difficulties by identifying a “silver bullet” solution. After working in districts in very different communities and with distinct challenges, it is clear that this temptation needs to be resisted. But just because there is no simple or universal model for improving underperforming schools does not mean that no good model exists. Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) is complex and multi-faceted, and so any strategy to improve education must also be complex and multi-faceted. The rest of this document sketches out the basic elements of the broad outlines of such a model, based on academic research, reflection, and practical experience, and responsive to the schools that need it the most.
There have been similar bouts of reform at the state level, for example the Michigan Merit Curriculum, grade level content expectations, and funding reforms after Proposal A. During each of these macro-phrases of educational reform, there have been countless more targeted initiatives that have been attempted (the use of teacher incentive systems, various forms of school choice, comprehensive school reform, the math wars, a focus on STEM, etc., etc.). Each of these waves of reform began with the promise of higher student achievement, greater equity, or both. While each initiative has contributed to later reform efforts, none of them has been an unqualified success. Each wave crested and then retreated, leaving the features altered but the basic contours of our educational landscape fundamentally unchanged: middling student achievement (from an international perspective) and massive inequities.

Many of these reform efforts have shared some problematic features that may have undermined their prospects for success. These include problems with implementation and policy instability, an over-emphasis on compliance and the use of incentives, too much uniformity and rigidity, approaches to leadership and teaching that are too essentialist, and a focus on adults rather than students. Throughout the rest of this section each of these problems are addressed in turn, followed by consideration of some reasons why so many educational programs fail to achieve their goals.

One of the principal reasons that these reforms have not achieved all they set out to is likely due to fragmented implementation.

For example, the RAND report on the effectiveness of comprehensive school reform programs indicates wide variation in the fidelity with which the initiative was pursued across systems. In fact, none of the schools they studied had fully implemented all of the core components of CSR (Vernez et al. 2006). Policies are not self-executing. The success of any program is very dependent on implementation: appropriate time for planning, professional development, stakeholder buy-in, and sufficient and appropriate resources are often lacking, especially in high-need districts. Implementation is further complicated when districts embrace too many policies, launching programs that are insufficiently supported, may not cohere well, or even work at cross-purposes. The result can be an incoherent mash of programs, none of which is fully implemented.

A related implementation obstacle is the problem of “policy churn.” Many initiatives are not pursued for enough time to give them any chance to succeed. It can take years before a program is running effectively, not least because it may take that long adapt to local circumstances or learn from trial and error. There is often a problem with inconsistency in implementation. Policymakers are often quick to move to the next idea when they do not see immediate results, or because the champions of the existing policy have left office. The result of constant changeover in priorities and personnel at the state level (at MDE, the legislature, etc.) and district and school leadership changes creates an unpredictable and inconsistent policy environment. The rapidity with
which school systems switch programs or priorities can also undercut the willingness of teachers and staff to commit to substantive changes. If today’s program will be gone tomorrow, teachers can reasonably ask: why bother changing at all?

A second problem afflicting too many initiatives is an excessive focus on compliance. This compliance model underlies many conceptions about policy change, with higher level authorities passing down mandates to subordinates, who are expected to dutifully implement the new programs.

This hierarchical, bureaucratic vision also infects much discussion about instruction as well. Despite a vast literature on the importance of teacher input (e.g. Bridwell-Mitchell & Sherer 2017) and the ineffectiveness of a “transmission” model of learning (e.g. Freeman et al. 2014), many approaches expect students to passively absorb information from teachers who are to hew carefully to prescribed curricula.

Related to a reliance on compliance is an over-emphasis on the use of incentives that neglects the organizational and personnel capacity of schools. Many market-based approaches to school improvement try to work around the “black box” of instruction by aligning incentives with desired outcomes. In principle, the model is quite simple: if curricular standards are well-aligned with student test scores, and these test scores are then linked to teacher, school, or district performance; then, in theory, a well-crafted system can use a mix of carrots (e.g. bonuses) and sticks (e.g. sanctions on schools) to force administrators and teachers to improve without policymakers having to engage with technical within-school processes. School choice plans have a similar dynamic, with parents using various signals of quality (e.g. student test scores) to choose the best school for their child, thus forcing weaker schools to improve or close. Although these strategies have their merits, they tend to abstract away from what happens inside of a school, or the specific behaviors associated with high performance. They leave entirely open to what degree schools and teachers have the knowledge and skills to respond to those incentives, rather than just the willingness. It also neglects the question of whether the local context of a school could be shaping the outcomes in that school for reasons that have nothing to do with the school itself.

Third, as with many bureaucratic models, the top-down model of school reform also has a tendency towards uniform, one-size-fits all approaches. However, it takes little imagination to expect that policy interventions could yield very different consequences within different contexts. What works in large, racially segregated urban schools may be utterly inappropriate for smaller rural schools and vice-versa. This is a particular problem when districts and schools purchase off-the-shelf interventions that may or may not be attuned to their particular needs. A common practice is that of identifying a singular high-performing school (especially one that has experienced dramatic improvement) and to look for noteworthy characteristics that are then suggested for dissemination. Of course,
this method of conducting educational “research” fails to meaningfully compare a number of schools that may be pursuing similar policies yet yielding profoundly different outcomes. Differences in community context, in the character and needs of students, and in the strategy for implementation make attempts to replicate educational successes notoriously difficult. One of the key prerequisites for scale-up that often receives little more than lip-service is the need for teacher buy-in: off the shelf-programs that are acquired without follow-through or sufficient teacher preparation and input are often doomed to failure whatever their hypothetical merits.

Fourth, many reforms focus on identifying the “best” teachers and administrators, often through the use of student test scores. Setting aside the ferocious debate in the academic literature about the utility of value-added models, even if a feasible system for using evaluation systems to identify an individual as a high-quality teacher or school leader were available, it wouldn’t necessarily help very much in improving all teachers and leaders.

School leadership and effective teaching are critically important to successful schools, but noting that someone is outstanding doesn’t help us understand why that person is outstanding. Instead of focusing on identifying and rewarding exemplars, it would be far more useful to examine the behaviors of excellent school personnel so that the human capital of the entire educational system can be improved.

Finally, a great deal of educational reform is primarily focused on adults, not students. Although adults must deliver educational services to children, it is extremely easy to become so consumed with questions of human resources and administrative organization that reformers lose sight of students altogether. Part of this tendency is due to the often adversarial relationships among adults within the educational policy domain: policymakers, parents, administrators, students, and other (adult) stakeholders are often in competition with one another, or are pursuing distinct goals or strategies. The result can be that education becomes something that happens “to” students instead of something that students pursue themselves (with the support of adults).

Given the foregoing discussion of so many pitfalls that have compromised worthwhile reform initiatives, it should be clear that educational reform is an enormously difficult enterprise. Considered independently from each other, the tasks of educating a child or transforming a large organization are both exceptional challenges. Improving an educational system represents a merger of these two missions, and so it should be no surprise that many initiatives fail to live up to their ambitions by over-emphasizing either the organizational or the pedagogical aspects of school reform. Each of the five problems discussed above highlights the need to consider both pedagogical and organizational aspects of schools and how they inform one another. The next section lays out an approach that tries to resolve that tension, helping avoid the mistakes of the past.
Educational systems are distinct from other types of organizations. There isn’t a clearly identifiable product, and the quality of the service provided often can’t be accurately judged for years. Not the least problem is that a “good” education for one person could be a very “bad” education for another. The “customers” of education are ambiguous – parents, governments, other educators, the local community, and the student themselves could all make claims of varying plausibility, a situation exacerbated by the fact that the object of education (the student) may not want the services offered.

The situation is made even more complicated (and challenging) in high-poverty urban districts, which have a range of distinct problems that make school reform exceptionally difficult. The most serious obstacle is, of course, the concentration of disadvantaged students, many of whom begin school well behind their more affluent peers in other schools. The relationship of socioeconomic status to student achievement is one of the most consistent findings in educational research: parental education, parental occupation, and family income are strongly associated with student knowledge and behaviors (Sirin 2005). This situation is made all the more serious by the growing proportion of students in poverty, which has now reached a majority (51%), according to a report by the Southern Education Foundation (2015). It is critical to note that the weaker starting position of disadvantaged children starts well before school, with achievement gaps manifesting at very early ages (Fernald et al. 2013). Students from poorer families start kindergarten and school well behind students from more affluent families. Schools with a substantial proportion of disadvantaged students therefore have a far greater challenge than those with fewer low-income students. The challenges of teaching in low-income urban schools means that disadvantaged schools and school districts tend to have the least effective and least experienced teachers (Goldhaber et al. 2015) - that the students who need the most help are often getting the least.

The disadvantages of high-poverty districts are very well-grounded in the literature, but MSU K-12 Outreach has also grappled with the critical problem of excessive teacher and administrator turnover, which makes it extremely difficult to build effective systems that can be sustained across time. Often new initiatives are never realized because too many key personnel are not retained in later years. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the organizational impact of concentrated poverty, which makes planning extremely difficult. With high student mobility and weak data systems, school leaders often don’t know how many students they will have until the school year begins, contributing to teacher transfers and general staff instability.

In developing an alternative model for supporting educational reform in high-needs schools, the MSU K-12 Outreach team draws from a number of different sources, each of which is informed by our unique position at the intersection of policy, research, and practice. MSU K-12 Outreach has also grappled with the critical problem of excessive teacher and administrator turnover, which makes it extremely difficult to build effective systems that can be sustained across time. Often new initiatives are never realized because too many key personnel are not retained in later years. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the organizational impact of concentrated poverty, which makes planning extremely difficult. With high student mobility and weak data systems, school leaders often don’t know how many students they will have until the school year begins, contributing to teacher transfers and general staff instability.

In developing an alternative model for supporting educational reform in high-needs schools, the MSU K-12 Outreach team draws from a number of different sources, each of which is informed by our unique position at the intersection of policy, research, and practice. MSU K-12 Outreach has also grappled with the critical problem of excessive teacher and administrator turnover, which makes it extremely difficult to build effective systems that can be sustained across time. Often new initiatives are never realized because too many key personnel are not retained in later years. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the organizational impact of concentrated poverty, which makes planning extremely difficult. With high student mobility and weak data systems, school leaders often don’t know how many students they will have until the school year begins, contributing to teacher transfers and general staff instability.
Table 1. Five Contrasting Approaches to School Reform

| Fragmented implementation vs. Whole system reform |
| Compliance & Incentives vs. Collaboration & Agency |
| Uniformity vs. Context & Personalization |
| Focus on Adults vs. Pastoral Care |
| Essentialist Leadership & Teaching vs. Human Capital Development |

Table 1 lays out the five basic challenges that were discussed in section two, and compares them with what MSU K-12 Outreach believes are the characteristics that any educational reform initiative will need in order to be successful. Each of these positive characteristics takes into account the careful interplay of both organizational and educational imperatives that are required for effective, sustainable school improvement, and each is based on a mix of research and practical experience. These five prerequisites of sound educational reform are: the use of whole system reform, the cultivation of collaboration and personal agency among all stakeholders, careful attention paid to local and student context, a commitment to improving the human capital of leaders and teachers, and a student-based conception of schooling based on the idea of pastoral care. Throughout this section, each of these ideas is discussed in more detail, after which is an explanation of MSU K-12 Outreach’s strategic approach in helping schools and districts embed these principles in their everyday processes. As will become obvious, each of these factors is closely related to the others: they are loose categories that frequently overlap.

The first key component is whole system reform. In contrast to the fragmented, incomplete, and poorly resourced implementation efforts that so often bedevil educational reform initiatives, MSU K-12 Outreach embrace a model that builds on Fullan’s notion “collective capacity” (2007). The idea has several basic components. First, treating schools in isolation is a mistake, especially in high-poverty areas. Instead of focusing on the activities of schools alone, and particularly within-school processes, school reform requires incorporating parents, community leaders, local service providers, and school district leaders into the drive for organizational change. This system-wide perspective is critical if the scarce resources of disadvantaged communities are going to be effectively leveraged. There need to be dense ties of communication among the various actors in the educational system, because all of them (parents, student, teachers, administrators, etc.) have a role to play; educating children does not begin with the first bell or end with the last.

Our work has also underscored the critical importance of district central office staff, and MSU K-12 Outreach has drawn extensively from Fullan’s work on whole system reform and the district reform model developed by the Wallace Foundation (Honig et al. 2010). Based on his research in the U.K. and Canada, among other laboratories of successful reform, Fullan emphasizes the role that school districts can serve as enablers of reform:

Focus on a few key ambitions (rather than trying to do everything at once),

- Reliance on data
- Energetic school district leadership
- The intelligent application of resources
- Coordinating with the rest of the community.

In short, a supportive school district is a necessary condition for school reform, but it is not a sufficient condition. A weak or adversarial central office can fatally compromise school-based efforts, but a strong central staff alone is not adequate for system change without other key elements.

One of the ways a school or school district can err is by being overly prescriptive, adopting a top-down approach to organizational change. By contrast, a system-wide perspective with rich ties of communication implies an emphasis on collaboration rather than command. The need for give and take applies to every thread in the dense web of collaboration: the connections between superintendents and principals, between principals and teachers, between school personnel and parents and community leaders, must always be two-way. These communications are vital for the practical problem of stakeholder buy-in, a requirement for effective implementation that is neglected as often in practice as it is touted in principle.

But buy-in does not simply mean that teachers are given
a one-session professional development for a ready-to-implement policy. It means instead that teachers have to have a real stake in the development of that policy, giving real weight to the concept of “distributed leadership.” Otherwise it will simply be another indifferently executed mandate. Further, a rich system of collaboration can facilitate relational trust (or “social capital”) which is a well-attested feature of successful organizations in which strict rules and procedures are less necessary and conflicts less severe (Bryk & Schneider 2002). Finally, a collaborative approach that treats each stakeholder with respect can help generate new ideas and correct cognitive biases. Often the problem with policy is not ill-will or pure incompetence, but the inability to recognize potential difficulties that could have been corrected if there had been more honest and open conversation at the start.

The idea of agency must also apply to students. Although student voice has become a popular topic of discussion in educational circles, the reality is that the structure of schools still treats students as objects rather than partners in the educational process. Given the assembly-line model of traditional instruction, it shouldn’t be surprising that many students are bored in the classroom and feel disengaged from their own education. In contrast, MSU K-12 Outreach strongly advocate for student agency - that students should be full partners in the schools. Student agency can be thought of individually, but that is akin to the idea of personalization that is discussed later in this section. Here the reference is to the collective role that students have in the schools. Student agency does not just mean surveying students (surveys too easily treat students as passive consumers rather than responsible agents) or enhancing the role of student government, although both of these can be useful. Focus groups allow greater scope for student input than surveys, but still fail to give students room for initiative and ownership. School leaders should recognize that students are fully capable of providing feedback to teachers, coming up with new ideas about how to solve problems in schools, serving as mentors to younger students, and of helping shape curriculum and instruction. MSU K-12 Outreach’s annual U.K. Study Tours revealed several schools where students successfully performed all of these roles, resulting in a meaningful collaboration of students and adults, and ultimately, higher-performing, self-directed children.

The third key characteristic of successful school reform is attention to context. Context here refers both to the context of the school and the context of the individual student. With respect to school context, uniform approaches to educational problems often run into trouble when they apply a strategy that was successful in one community to a school existing in a radically different environment. For example, a strategy that relies on exceptionally motivated and hard-working teachers might be able to accommodate any attending staff burnout because the school is situated in a prosperous urban area with access to a large teacher labor market, because for every teacher they lose there might be newly prepared teachers ready to take over. Exporting the same model to a rural area or poorer city that struggles
to find new teachers would likely result in a massive
teacher shortage in short order. This example is just one
of dozens of contextual factors that reforms must pay
attention to. Along with the economic context, factors like
density, transportation, culture and tradition, the kinds
of immigrants, access to technology, the relations with
surrounding communities and other institutional actors–
each of these elements can have a profound impact on
the implementation of policies in communities that might
superficially seem quite similar. Although learning from
other school systems can be the source of new ideas, great
care must be taken in selecting the right models and in
adapting those models to the specific needs of particular
schools.

An attention to context must also take place at the
student level, a consideration that can be understood
as “personalization” – that the educational needs of
every student need to be approached individually. Too
often students are lumped together into overly broad
demographic or achievement categories, classifications
that conceal enormous variation in the needs and desires
of students. Attending to individual student context
requires exactly that – that educational staff explore
the needs of each and every student, one at a time. As
described here, personalization does not mean what is
often marketed as personalization, namely digital and
online learning systems. Electronic systems can be used as
a supplement to personalization, but they should never be
confused with the broader concept. As described by David
Hargreaves, personalization has four components, which
he calls the “four deeps”: deep learning (assessments,
student voice, learning to learn), deep support (mentoring
and coaching, advice and guidance), deep leadership
(design and organization and workforce reform), and deep
experience (new technologies and curriculum). Hargreaves’
is a very broad conception, including many of the elements
considered elsewhere in our model. Here the focus is on
his concept of deep learning; that schools should adopt
a model of “co-construction” in which students shape
their own educational experiences, both in the aims of
education and the organization of the curriculum. The aim
of schools is not to convey a fixed body of knowledge,
but to foster maturity and an ability to learn in individual
students.

Hargreaves describes the ideal learner as:

“An articulate, autonomous but
collaborative learner, with high
meta-cognitive control and the generic
skills of learning, gained through
engaging educational experiences with
enriched opportunities and challenges, ...
in schools whose culture and structures
sustain the continuous co-construction
of education through shared leadership.”

Hargreaves’ vision for schools is obviously a very
challenging one, but it is a view of schooling that
represents a radical departure from the norm. It is also
one that calls for schools to attend to more than just the
academic side of school, but the social and emotional
condition of students as well – the “whole child.” This
brings us to the fourth characteristic of schools that
have overcome background disadvantage: pastoral care.
It’s very important to recognize that this term has no
explicit religious overtones. Rather, it is an approach to
supporting students that has contributed to success in
high-performing, high-poverty schools in the U.K. Whereas
in the U.S. so much of the debate about education is
focused on adults; in schools focused on pastoral care the
adults are concentrated on the needs of students. A robust
system of pastoral care entails a commitment to all of the
needs of students, not just their narrow academic ones.
Without a sense of belonging and self-worth, it will be
extremely difficult to persuade a student to take academic
content seriously.

As part of its U.K. Study Tours, MSU K-12 Outreach’s team
of researchers and practitioners has explored how schools in struggling communities have nevertheless beaten the odds. What MSU K-12 Outreach found was a radically different structure than is typical in U.S. schools. These “overachieving” schools have organized themselves around the clear mission of ensuring that every student has easy access to a trained adult. Rather than a small team of counselors, virtually every member of the adult staff – administrator, teacher, or support staff – has a role to play in supporting students. Instead of a system that imposes clear lines of accountability and control, the “London model” creates a complex, web-like structure of support in which adults collaborate to identify and address specific student needs (and which incidentally requires a system of adult collaboration and distributed leadership to be successful). This approach is supported by the UK’s innovative “pupil premium,” which targets money to disadvantaged students rather than disadvantaged schools, and gives school leaders wide flexibility and scope for creativity in tailoring support for students.

Finally, our model promotes a distinct conception of leadership and teaching emphasizing human capital development for everyone working in the schools. Adults are of course critically important in schools. Without effective leadership and skilled, committed teachers, and the contributions of support staff, no school can hope to prosper. However, MSU K-12 Outreach agrees wholeheartedly with the sentiment in the Michigan Department of Education’s new ESSA plan: 

“While we know that effective teaching and leadership are the most important in-school factors in improved student outcomes, we cannot incentivize, either intentionally or unintentionally, a hero-culture model that attributes student success to the herculean efforts of individual educators.”

Trying to identify and recruit “hero-leaders” and “super-teachers” is a counterproductive error because there simply aren’t enough charismatic leaders to go around – creating a “bidding war” for their talent where high-poverty districts will suffer a potentially crippling disadvantage. Further, such an approach can undermine collaboration and lead to goal displacement. By contrast, our human capital approach focuses on broad-scale professional development that strengthens the capacity of every teacher and leader. The focus should not be discovering the “best” teacher or leader, but better understanding what behaviors help them to be so effective (and in what contexts) so that other administrators and instructors can learn from them. Instead of an over-emphasis on recruiting the “best” teachers, the aim should be to make a school’s teachers the best.

Although these five key characteristics of school improvement (whole system reform, collaboration and agency, context and personalization, pastoral care, and human capital development) are important to strengthening any school system, they are of particular importance in high-needs districts. They are by no means the only elements that school leaders should keep in mind, but it is difficult to imagine sustained school reform without them.
Although MSU K-12 Outreach has a strong commitment to its model of school improvement, it can’t implement these changes on its own. Ultimately schools must make the changes themselves. While there are some situations in which MSU K-12 Outreach will provide direct services in the short term, partnering with district staff when there is a critical lack of capacity, the main role is to provide technical assistance to schools and districts. MSU K-12 Outreach’s core mission is to act as facilitators: to help schools build their individual and collective capacity, to construct systems, and to internalize the key elements of successful school reform. The essential insight is that improving schools requires the application of the lessons of effective instruction to the problem of school reform itself: scaffolding, personalization, and context are all critical to learners and educators alike. In addition, more often than not sustainable change is incremental, complex, highly contextual, and requires balancing the desires and needs of the expert/teacher and school/students. The task is further complicated by the ongoing obligations of schools. Reforming schools has been compared to repairing a plane in mid-air: changes must occur even while the day-to-day tasks of running classrooms continue. They don’t have luxury of shutting down for a year for renovations.

If outside organizations are to support school improvement, the single best form that can take is educational coaching. Coaching is a critical tool for supporting school reform because its purpose is to help teachers and leaders develop their own individual and collective capacities. MSU K-12 Outreach has developed an innovative form of instructional and leadership coaching, and have trained hundreds of Michigan educational coaches over the last decade in coaching as “mediation”–of intentionally influencing coachees’ perspectives and motivations by helping them establish psychological and emotional distance from their own thinking. Rather than a directive model where external consultants tell educators to “do this” and “do that,” a model of effective coaching practices the art of asking probing questions that reveal cognitive biases and rigidities. MSU leadership coaches focus on helping school principals and superintendents to internalize the importance of collaboration and distributed leadership, as well as to understand that effective organizations require the right kind of internal processes, not just the right goals. The fundamental task of MSU leadership coaches is to help coachees’ behavior match up with their professed beliefs, helping them to become “conscious practitioners.” Principals all too often have an intellectual understanding of the importance of stakeholder buy-in or strategic delegation of responsibilities without being fully aware that they are continuing to act in a traditional compliance-oriented model. By building trust, coaches can assist leaders in developing their personal skills and fulfill their organizations’ purpose through personal support rather than criticism.

When brought in to support school reform in a district, MSU K-12 Outreach’s team proceeds in three phases. In the first phase, MSU K-12 Outreach’s team conducts a thorough needs assessment using a systems approach, analyzing the entirety of the educational structure inside the schools and the contextual factors influencing the schools. MSU K-12 Outreach examines the degree to which the district as a whole (as well as each individual school) is on the continuum of the five effective/ineffective features discussed in previous sections. This information is collected via self-reports of school leaders, discussions with internal and external stakeholders, and careful analysis of extant data. MSU K-12 Outreach assesses elements such as:

- What are the joint and personal capacities of teachers and leaders?
- How focused are the interventions?
- How healthy are the lines of communication?
- How much does the district rely on compliance and incentives?
- What is the state of the climate and culture in schools?
- What is the degree of trust and cooperation?

MSU K-12 Outreach also frequently conducts an initiative analysis in order to determine how focused the district’s programs are, or whether money and person-power is scattered thinly across many interventions, resulting in weak implementation.
With this information in hand (subject to constant re-assessment and revision), MSU K-12 Outreach develops a loose map of the key barriers, challenges, and assets in a district, at which point MSU K-12 Outreach moves to the second phase: short-term interventions. The nature and intensity of these activities vary greatly within a district. Because of its influence on district as a whole - and because without a supportive central office whole-system reform is virtually impossible - the main emphasis in phase two is on strengthening the central office. However, in this phase MSU K-12 Outreach does conduct initial interventions by assigning MSU leadership coaches in the schools and beginning the process of constructing workable systems. The relationship of the schools to the rest of the community is another key item of concern in this phase.

Where there are bright spots in a school system, MSU K-12 Outreach can often take a more limited role (for example, focusing on aligning school goals and communication with the central office). However, where there is an immediate crisis, a key department that is non-functional (or non-existent), or missing personnel, MSU K-12 Outreach may provide direct services, filling in to conduct essential tasks to replace missing capacity. However, it is always clear that this is a short-term expedient, and as the crisis passes MSU K-12 Outreach staff step back into a coaching role, supporting newly developed teams that are beginning to find their feet. In all cases, MSU K-12 Outreach's focuses on its role as a facilitator and relies primarily on its team of coaches (leadership, instructional, data, etc.) to mentor key institutional actors. A primary goal in phase two is to build trust between coach and coachee without which the project cannot be successful. Relational trust is also a principal theme in supporting leaders, however, and MSU coaches often play a major role in helping build (or re- build) social capital among school personnel, parents, and community stakeholders.

In phase three, MSU K-12 Outreach works outward from the central office, intensifying phase two efforts in the schools, focusing more directly on teaching and learning. Again, the scope of this activity varies greatly from project to project, and from school to school. In this stage, MSU K-12 Outreach often places the bulk of its attention to helping schools cultivate greater student agency and stronger whole student supports, while also supporting improvements in instruction and data use through mentoring of Professional Learning Communities. Using its coaching model, MSU K-12 Outreach staff scaffold their support for individuals and teams, focusing initially on basic capacities before moving on to more complete ones. As coachees progress towards greater capacity and self-sufficiency, MSU K-12 Outreach team members gradually scale back the intensity of their involvement. Although there is a constant process of feedback and evaluation throughout its intervention, after phase three a summative review process considers lessons learned both for clients and MSU K-12 Outreach itself, preparatory for later projects.
CONCLUSION

Providing greater educational opportunities for disadvantaged students is the most compelling challenge in U.S. education. MSU K-12 Outreach has built on decades of professional experience and academic research to develop a model for addressing this urgent task, as well as the techniques and personnel for helping school leaders implement that model. MSU K-12 Outreach believes that high poverty urban school districts have the potential to improve, and over the next several years MSU K-12 Outreach plans to expand beyond the work in Flint to bring MSU K-12 Outreach’s model of school reform to districts throughout Michigan and beyond.

REFERENCES


REFERENCES

Providing greater educational opportunities for disadvantaged students is the most compelling challenge in U.S. education. MSU K-12 Outreach has built on decades of professional experience and academic research to develop a model for addressing this urgent task, as well as the techniques and personnel for helping school leaders implement that model. MSU K-12 Outreach believes that high poverty urban school districts have the potential to improve, and over the next several years MSU K-12 Outreach plans to expand beyond the work in Flint to bring MSU K-12 Outreach’s model of school reform to districts throughout Michigan and beyond.

REFERENCES


SPARTANS WILL.