



School Improvement

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Notes



High Performing Schools

What does your community need to know about curriculum, instruction, and assessment to support the school's efforts?

In order to impact student achievement, it is necessary to understand the teaching and learning process as well as common characteristics of high performing schools. The basis for the teaching and learning process are curriculum, instruction, and assessment. There is no single thing schools can do to ensure high student performance. Research has shown, however, that high performing schools tend to have several common characteristics. Results from the 90/90/90 studies and the National Study of School Evaluation on "Indicators of Schools of Quality," are summarized below. A school staff survey based on the high performing characteristics is available at www.GeorgiaEducation.org.

The Center for Performance Assessment conducted a four-year study of schools that had more than 90% of the students eligible for free and reduced lunch, more than 90% of the students were minorities, and more than 90% of the students achieved at or above grade level according to independently conducted tests of academic achievement. The study is often referred to as 90/90/90. It included schools in a variety of settings and gathered data from 130,000 students. The purpose was to find what these schools were doing to be so successful with students usually considered to be challenging. The characteristics found to be in common were:

- There was a focus on academic achievement.
 - Staff in these schools are dedicated to a focus on student achievement.
 - Student achievement results are displayed in the classroom and throughout the school.
 - Data about continuous improvement are displayed.
 - Exemplary student work is displayed.
- Clear curriculum choices have been made.
 - More time is spent on core subjects like reading and mathematics.
 - Curriculum is focused on depth rather than breadth.
 - Rather than teaching many learning outcomes, teachers focus on teaching fewer outcomes very well.
- There is frequent assessment of student progress with multiple opportunities for improvement.
 - Instead of receiving a low grade and moving on to the next topic, students who perform poorly are given multiple opportunities to improve performance.
 - Weekly assessments of student progress are administered.
- There is an emphasis on writing.
 - Written responses are included in performance assessments.
 - There is a high emphasis on informative writing.
 - There are established standards for good writing and students are held to the standard.
- There is external evaluation.
 - There are established common assessment practices throughout the school.
 - Common assessment practices are reinforced through regular exchanges of student work. For example, teachers would grade each other's students rather than their own.

Curriculum

Curriculum is what teachers teach. In Georgia, the State Board of Education is required to develop a statewide basic curriculum including the competencies that all students must master before completion of high school. The recently revised curriculum in Georgia is called the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). The former curriculum, the Quality Core Curriculum or QCC, was based solely on **content standards** – what a student was expected to know. The GPS **performance standards** incorporate content standards but also explain how well a student must perform. Local boards of education must



adopt the state curriculum or one that exceeds the state standards. Two other terms to understand when looking at curriculum are standards and benchmarks. *Standards* are clear, fixed statements of student knowledge and performance. They provide focus and direction for the teachers. Standards define what will be taught and measured. *Benchmarks* are identified standards that are critical to successful performance in subsequent grade level courses.

The curriculum is a separate document from the textbook. Textbooks are a resource, not the curriculum. State assessments measure students' knowledge of GPS standards, not the content of the textbooks. Teachers are expected to use other resources to fully cover the curriculum. Local school systems select textbooks from the approved state list. The textbook cycle for any given subject is every seven years.

Questions to Ask:

- Are the standards posted in the classroom?
- Can students state what is being learned?
- What curriculum resources are being used?
- How is implementation of the curriculum monitored?
- What is the implementation timeline for the new curriculum in your school?
- What professional development will the teachers receive?
- What evidence do you see in your school of these high performing characteristics?

Instruction

Instruction is how teachers teach. Research in effective schools finds the following common characteristics:

- Teachers form instructional groups that fit students' academic and emotional needs.
- Teachers make efficient use of time.
- Teachers carefully orient students to lessons.
- Teachers provide clear and focused instruction.
- Teachers routinely provide students with feedback and reinforcement regarding their performance.
- Teachers review and re-teach as necessary to help all students master learning the material.
- Teachers use strategies to help build students' critical thinking skills.
- Teachers use effective questioning techniques to build basic and higher level skills.
- Teachers give high-needs students the extra time and instruction they need to succeed.
- Teachers monitor student progress closely.

Information about instructional programs in your school should include the standards being taught, the amount of time allocated for instruction for each program, the goals of each instructional program, special programs related to each instructional program (science fair), and how technology is used and integrated into the program. Teachers need time for grade-level and cross-grade-level planning. They need opportunities to collaborate and access to resources.

Questions to Ask:

- Do teachers use a variety of instructional strategies to deliver instruction?
- Have teachers received staff development on instructional strategies?
- How much time do teachers have for planning?
- Do teachers meet regularly for cross-grade-level planning?
- Do teachers participate in collaborative planning?
- How do teachers differentiate instruction?
- What evidence do you see of the high performing characteristics in your school?



Assessment

Assessment measures student learning. In high performing schools teachers monitor student progress closely. Teachers use alternative assessments as well as traditional tests to evaluate individual strengths and weaknesses. Effective teachers plan instruction to meet individual student needs and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Results from assessments provide information about how well students are performing to educators, parents, and the community. While there is controversy about how much testing is needed, assessments are an important tool for teachers and students. For students, tests communicate what is important, establish standards for performance, and provide feedback on the quality of their work. For teachers, tests measure the effectiveness of instruction, identify the strengths and weaknesses in curriculum and instruction, and provide diagnostic information for instructional planning.

Questions to Ask:

How are assessment results used?

Are periodic assessments given rather than just a final test?

Are pre and post tests used?

Is instruction adjusted based on test results?

What evidence do you see of the results being used as they are in high performing schools?

Summary

- In high performing schools there is a clear and shared focus on high standards and expectations.
- Teachers and staff truly believe that all students can learn and that they can teach all students. They believe there are barriers for some students to overcome, but they are not insurmountable or an excuse for lack of achievement.
- Effective school leadership is the catalyst and the sustaining element in high performing schools. Effective leaders advocate, nurture, and sustain a school culture and instructional program that is conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
- There are high levels of collaboration and communication between and among teachers of all grades. Parents and members of the community are involved in solving the problems of the school.
- The curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned with standards. Research-based materials and teaching and learning strategies are implemented. There is a clear understanding of the assessment system, what is measured and how it is measured.
- Teaching and learning are continually adjusted based on frequent monitoring of student progress and needs. A variety of assessment procedures are utilized, and the results are used to improve student performance and the instructional program.
- Professional development is ongoing and based on high need areas. It should be aligned with the school's and district's common focus, objectives, and high expectations.
- Students in high performing schools feel respected and are engaged in learning. Instruction is personalized and small learning environments are used to increase student contact with teachers as needed.
- There are high levels of community and parent involvement in these schools. There is a sense that all stakeholders have a responsibility to educate students, not just the teachers and staff. Parents, businesses, social service agencies, and higher education all play a vital role in this effort.



Sharing School Improvement Strategies

School Name: _____ Website: _____

Contact person: _____ E-mail: _____ Phone: _____

- 1) What approaches do you think are making the biggest difference in improving student achievement?
- 2) How have you included staff in decision-making around the approaches you've put in place?
- 3) How has moving to this approach made a difference in teaching practices in your building?
- 4) What is the system the school uses to make transitions for students entering and leaving the school?
- 5) What kind of professional development does the school provide for staff and families?
- 6) How has the school involved families in strategies that improve student achievement?
- 7) How have you budgeted your resources to provide for this approach?
- 8) What surprises did you encounter in your first year of implementation?
- 9) How does the staff use assessment to make program and instructional decisions?
- 10) What do you see as the greatest opportunities this approach has provided for your staff and students?

Specific Observations You Want to Share:



The School Improvement Plan

The school principal shall ...Develop the school improvement plan and school operation plan and submit the plans to the school council for its review, comments, recommendations, and approval (O.C.G.A. 20-2-86 (r)(4)).

School improvement plans are usually written to cover a three-to-five year period. The plans, however, should be reviewed and updated annually. The ultimate goal is not only to address and correct a specific weakness, but also to have effective improvement strategies become part of the school culture and organization. All stakeholders should understand the goals of the school improvement plan, what progress is being made, and how they can support it. **It is the school council's responsibility to review the school improvement plan, recommend changes if needed, approve it, and monitor progress.**

School Improvement Process

Where are we?	Analyze data.
Where are we going?	Set goals.
How are we going to get there?	Select strategies.
Are we there yet?	Monitor progress.

The school improvement process begins by answering the question "Where are we?" Part of the answer is found in data analysis. Analyzing the data is only a start, however. It is necessary to dig further to find what exactly that data is telling you. Effective goal-setting requires specific information.

Goals

Goals specifically define the targeted improvement. What do you want to accomplish in terms of student outcomes, by when, and how will progress be monitored? An appropriately written goal meets certain criteria:

- It is measurable.
- It is clear and specific.
- It is directly related to student achievement.
- It is linked to year-end assessments or other standards-based assessments.
- It is annual, reflecting increases over the previous year.
- It is written in simple, direct language.

If a goal meets the above criteria, the next consideration is whether it should be in the school improvement plan. Data-based research should be the basis for each goal. Needs should be prioritized and the goals limited to an achievable number. The action plan to meet the goal should have a stated timeline that is reasonable and attainable. The responsibility for accomplishing each goal should be clearly assigned and shared by all the stakeholders. Although the goal should be linked to a year-end assessment, there should be frequent progress checks to monitor the effectiveness of the strategies put into place. Suggestions for change in the school improvement plan might include changing goals to relate more directly to student achievement, reducing the number of goals to a more manageable number, or moving the timeline for accomplishing a goal.

**Exercise:**

Evaluate these sample goals against the criteria.

“Increase the percentage of students passing the Georgia High School Science Test by 10 percentage points by next spring.”

“Students will demonstrate effective problem solving skills.”

Is the goal measurable?

Is the goal clear and specific?

Does it relate directly to student achievement?

Is the goal linked to a year-end assessment or other standards-based assessment?

Is it annual, reflecting an increase over the previous year?

Is it written in simple, direct language?

In the exercise above, the first goal meets the criteria. The target of 10 percentage points makes it measurable. It is clear and specific. It is linked to a year-end assessment, reflects an increase over the previous year, and is written in simple, direct language. It is directly related to student achievement.

The second goal is not measurable. In what way will the students demonstrate effective problem solving skills? What does “effective” mean here? The goal is clear, but not specific. It does relate directly to student achievement, but is not linked to a year-end or standards-based assessment. It does not reflect an annual goal or an increase from the previous year. The second goal is a good beginning to the goal-setting process. It needs to be made more specific and tied to an assessment with an annual goal set.

Strategies

Strategies are selected to meet each school improvement goal. The goal is the destination, and the strategies are the vehicles to get there. When evaluating strategies, consider the following questions:

- Do the strategies specify actions to be taken?
- Are the specified actions different from the current way things are done?
- Do the strategies directly address the goal of increasing student achievement?
- Do the strategies focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school organization that will directly impact student achievement?
- When implemented, will the strategies directly impact student learning?

One way to find strategies to consider is to look at higher performing schools. Some schools do better overall, while some schools excel with particular subgroups. Look for schools doing well in areas your school is targeting for improvement. Contact or visit those schools to find out what they are doing. When selecting strategies, keep in mind the resources needed, including staff development, funding, and evaluations. An excellent strategy that can not be fully implemented is more likely to cause frustration than create positive change.

**Exercise:**

Evaluate these sample strategies against the criteria.

Goal:

“By next spring, increase the percentage of students passing the Georgia High School Writing Test by 12 percentage points.”

Strategy:

1. Implement writing across the curriculum.
2. Increase the number of times students write per week in every class to one.

In the exercise above, both strategies meet the criteria. Both strategies specify actions to be taken. The words “implement” and “increase” indicate that these actions are different from the current way things are being done. (Note: This is a question to ask as a plan is being developed. Once the plan is in place, strategies do not need to be reevaluated if the goals are being met. How to monitor the progress of the plan is discussed below.) Both strategies directly address the goal of increasing student achievement. The strategies focus on curriculum and instruction that will directly impact student achievement. When implemented, both strategies will directly impact student learning.

Use communication channels to build community awareness of and support for the school's goals. All the stakeholders should understand the goals of the school improvement plan, what progress is being made, and how they can support it. In other words, everybody needs to know what boat they are on, which direction to row, if they are on course, and when the destination is reached.

Monitoring Progress

When monitoring the progress toward meeting the school improvement goals, the effectiveness of the strategies selected are also being evaluated. If progress is being made, then the strategies are working and no change is needed. If progress is not being made, then the strategies and their implementation need to be reevaluated. When making changes consider the intended and possible unintended results. Who will be affected? How can those affected be a part of the planning process? **Any change to the plan should be as well thought out as the original plan.** A checklist follows to guide you through this process. A Goal Review Worksheet is also provided as you evaluate each goal.

Consider: The ultimate goal is not only to address and correct a specific weakness, but also to have the effective improvement strategies become part of the school culture and organization. Are the effective practices being internalized or are they seen only as actions on the school improvement plan?



Checklist for Monitoring Progress

- Is the timeline being met?
 - If not:
 1. Were the planned strategies reasonable?
 2. Were there sufficient resources, including time?
 3. Did the assigned people follow through?
 4. What needs to be changed to make this plan workable?
- What evidence of implementation exists?
- Are the indicated resources available and being used?
 - If not, why?
 1. If a reallocation of the needed resources has occurred, what are the alternatives?
 2. What needs to be changed to make the plan workable?
- How close did the school come to meeting its targets?
 1. Where did the school meet or exceed its goal?
 2. How did the students within subgroups meet or exceed goals?
 3. Which goals were not fully met?
- Is the trend changing?
- What barriers or challenges have occurred since the plan was last reviewed?
- What steps should be taken to address these barriers or challenges?
- Does the Action Plan need to be adjusted?
- Who will publicize the progress made?



Insert Goal Review Worksheet