



# Action Planning: Rowing in the Same Direction

By Kurtis Hewson and Lorna Adrian

A collaborative action-planning process ensures school improvement that is focused, ongoing, and sustainable.

It's shortly after 11 a.m. at Claresholm Elementary School when the vice-principal enters Ms. Lamb's third-grade classroom, followed by 18 excited first-grade students. Every Wednesday, he supervises a mixed class there. Today, the first graders will be reading their latest compositions to their third-grade buddies, who in turn will then select a story to read to their younger partners.

Leaving her classroom, Ms. Lamb dashes to the learning support room to discover her action-planning team already assembled. Today, the team will evaluate the staff responses from a survey the team created regarding current three-way conferencing practices and staff hesitations in using

them. A group of three teachers and three support staff have been researching the potential impact of three-way conferencing and the purpose of the survey was to gauge current staff understandings and to determine future directions the team needs to take. Their action plan is to develop materials to

provide a solid foundation for school-wide three-way conferencing in the upcoming school year.

By the end of the hour-long meeting, the action-planning team has decided to conduct a “Myths of Three-Way Conferencing” session for the staff at an upcoming planning day, which will address concerns raised in the survey and share related research. It is decided to have Ms. Lamb propose the session idea at the next staff steering committee meeting, while other team members prepare for the professional development activity. This will include inviting a teacher from a neighboring school who has conducted effective three-way conferences. As the team departs, Ms. Lamb collects her notes, which she will later post on the bulletin board shared by the school’s three action-planning teams.

### A Cohesive Plan for School Improvement

Two years ago, as Claresholm Elementary prepared for a new school year with a new principal, we had the usual shopping list of ambitions—focus on student learning, support the staff, empower parents, and more. However, in examining the school’s improvement plan it became apparent that we had a unique opportunity to develop solid structures that would initiate, drive, and sustain strategic school improvement.

As a result of study, personal reflection, and communication with other schools, we ascertained that whatever model was adopted or developed would need to adhere to three guiding principles:

- Support a community of learners;
- Involve all staff members; and
- Recognize, use, and strengthen staff and team capacity.

### An Action-Planning Process

Heavily influenced by the ever-expanding body of research and work related to professional learning communities (PLCs), we sketched out an action-planning process that focused

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on these guiding principles. The process evolved significantly during the next two years to involve all staff members in collaborative teams, each focusing on one goal of our school’s improvement plan: to improve student reading. Team 1 focused on providing effective reading instruction; team 2 focused on developing common assessments and examining reporting practices; and team 3 focused on establishing three-way conferencing.

Each team established a clearly defined goal, developed and initiated strategies to move the school toward that goal, and continuously monitored its progress. These plans became living documents as the teams followed a cycle of research, sharing, and implementation during the three-year planning cycle.

Although the action-planning process is not overly complex, there are some fundamental features that support a collaborative, staff-driven approach to school improvement efforts:

**Clear Direction.** Guiding the process is a clearly defined and shared focus that can be referred to as the school’s core goal. Essentially, we need to know where our boat is heading and that all the paddles are rowing in the same direction. Without this objective, action-planning teams can become misguided, disenchanted, or see little connection between their work and school improvement efforts.

**Team Leadership.** Early variations of the action-planning model made the critical error of not identifying or developing team leadership. The result was a collaborative process that got the

ball rolling for school improvement efforts, but lacked cohesion and direction. We determined that each team needed to have a leader identified with a defined set of responsibilities. These leaders were provided with support from administration to ensure consistency between teams. The three action team leaders also were members of the staff steering committee, which includes administrators. The purpose of this collaborative leadership team is to:

- Ensure that each team’s action plans are aligned to the overall school focus and are interrelated;
- Develop a professional development framework for the school; and
- Provide a direction for school administration, including staff meeting design, school budgeting, calendars, and staffing.

**Time.** Embedding time into the school schedule for action-planning teams to meet ensured that their work was not only ongoing but that improvement efforts were constantly guiding and impacting the school. Staff members covered classes for one another and we were able to combine classes without requiring additional preparation for teachers.

**Financial and Administrative Support.** Each action-planning team had an established budget to fund resources for strategies, professional development, and potential substitute time.

In addition to funding, support from administration was critically important. Administrators met with individual leaders to guide team direction, established planning templates and materials, took over classrooms to allow teams to meet, and secured other resources.

**Data and Results.** Each action-planning team determined how its success would be measured and monitored a variety of school data sources to assess the impact of its specific strategies and actions on the school’s education plan. A focus on results also guided future action-planning goals and areas in need of being addressed.

**Communication.** With three action-planning teams working toward school improvement, communication was vital. In addition to team leaders meeting monthly to share progress and future directions, notes from each individual meeting were published for the entire staff. At every staff meeting, action-plan leaders described their ongoing work and invited questions

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and comments. The entire staff was involved in the action-planning process, with the parent council playing a consultative role.

**Research and Organizational Growth.** Unless firmly grounded on educational research and organizational growth, the action-planning process can lead to events and activities that increase staff workload and provide little sustainable growth. For example, instead of planning one-shot workshops for staff, action-planning teams took time to research and discuss related articles and books aimed at increasing their knowledge, and then disseminated that knowledge to the rest of the staff.

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### It's *Not* a Professional Learning Community!

It's important to conclude with one discrete, yet crucial, distinction to avoid further muddying the PLC waters. Establishing an action-planning model is not the same as creating a PLC. Although both processes are highly collaborative, focus on results, and build staff capacity, the subtle difference is that action planning is not focused single-mindedly on student learning and instruction. By focusing primarily on school improvement, the action-planning process provides support for and complements PLCs.

For example, having a vertically stratified staff team lead the charge for establishing common assessments at each grade level supports and ensures the success of horizontally stratified grade-level teams in creating and using these common assessments—the true work of a PLC.

By building and supporting a collaborative action-planning process that focuses on our community of learners, involves all staff members, and builds leadership and team capacity in our school, we have been able to ensure school improvement planning that is ongoing, meaningful, focused, and sustainable. Staff members have become powerful change agents in our school community, driving research-based efforts that not only support the

work of our PLC, but have shifted the culture of our school.

We can more effectively lead the learning in the school when everyone has their oars in the water, rowing in the same direction. 📌

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### WEB RESOURCES

Under the school improvement tab of Claresholm Elementary's Web page, you can access sample action plans, templates, and other resources related to action-planning efforts at the school. [www.lrzd.ab.ca/schools/ces](http://www.lrzd.ab.ca/schools/ces)

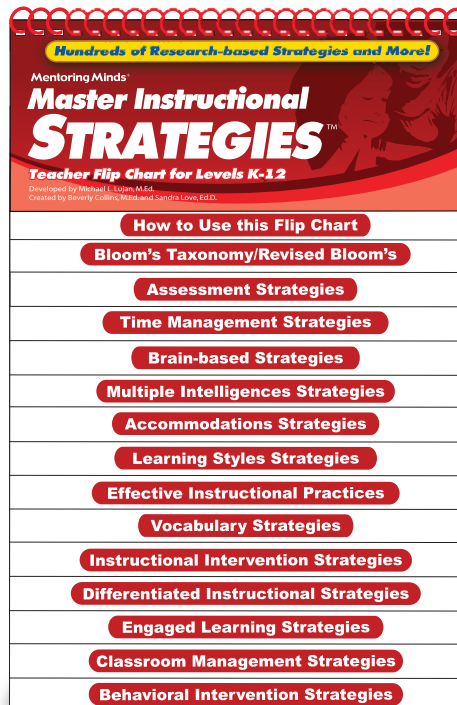
LeadSpace, developed by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, includes a number of useful tools and resources for school leaders in the area of shared leadership. Access information about distributed/shared leadership by visiting the vision section of the leadership page. [www.leadspace.govt.nz](http://www.leadspace.govt.nz)

Wisconsin's Information Network for Successful School Web site includes a section titled "How do We Promote Shared Leadership in our School Community," with links to useful research and tips for building successful teams in schools. [http://dpi.wi.gov/sig/practices/leader\\_1.html](http://dpi.wi.gov/sig/practices/leader_1.html)

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