

Leadership and Decision Making: Introduction

Center on Innovation & Improvement

True to its nature, the field of education customarily relies upon the lever of change it knows best for improving schools—building the capacity of educators to better perform their roles by teaching them new skills and ways of doing things. Capacity building through training, professional development, and access to resources is a single lever for change, and alone it is often disappointing in its effects.

The accountability movement has taught us that improvement requires yardsticks for performance, both to guide school people’s improvement efforts and to enhance their motivation to change. Public disclosure of school performance, based on transparent metrics, carries with it incentives for change. Public recognition of exemplary performance provides a positive incentive—something to strive for. Public disclosure of poor performance is a negative incentive—educators try harder to avoid it.

For the past couple decades, school improvement has largely been driven by these two levers of change—capacity building (professional development tied to evidence-based practices) and incentives (accountability’s double-edged sword of public recognition and professional embarrassment). However, capacity and incentive without opportunity create a formula for frustration and discouragement. The 2009 SIG program adds to these two levers of change an important third one—opportunity for change. Simply put, this means getting out of people’s way so they can make decisions, take actions, and assume responsibility for what they do.

The interventions of turnaround and transformation call for greater school-level autonomy, more flexibility in staffing, scheduling, and budgeting, along with greater accountability for results. A restart, wherein the school is opened under new governance and with a chance for dramatically new ways of operating, carries with it the expanded autonomy granted to charter schools and educational management organizations. Given the opportunity for greater latitude in decision making, just how does leadership respond?

This chapter looks at provisions in the SIG program that expand school leaders’ opportunity to make sound decisions by:

- removing bureaucratic and regulatory barriers,
- providing essential information and tools for analyzing data, and
- tracking progress to facilitate agile adjustments in course.

The chapter's topics reinforce the SIG program's insistence upon greater school-level autonomy and responsibility, more flexibility in local decision making, and greater accountability on the part of school leaders for results. As a counter-balance to the over-reliance on the leadership of one person (the principal), the chapter also provides guidance for putting in place team structures and processes to distribute leadership (as well as responsibility) in order to accelerate change and sustain positive reforms.