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Note on the PELP Coherence Framework

In today's accountability environment, public school districts face an imperative to achieve concrete performance goals related to student achievement. In order to accomplish these goals in all schools, not just some schools, the organizational elements of a district – its culture, structure and systems, resources, stakeholders, and environment – must be managed in a way that is coherent with an explicit strategy to improve teaching and learning in every classroom, in every school. Leaders who have tried to implement a district-wide strategy for improving the achievement of all students know how difficult it is to achieve this coherence.

The PELP Coherence Framework[1] is designed to help district leaders identify the key elements that support a district-wide improvement strategy, bring those elements into a coherent relationship with the strategy and each other, and guide the actions of people throughout the district in the pursuit of high levels of achievement for all students.

Overview

Webster's Dictionary defines coherence as "the quality of being logically integrated." Coherence, for the purpose of this note, means that the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy. The PELP Coherence Framework is designed to help leaders effectively implement an improvement strategy by strengthening coherence among actions at the district, school and classroom level. The framework emerged out of interactions with

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[1] The PELP Coherence Framework draws on organizational alignment frameworks such as The Congruence Model developed by Professor Michael Tushman of Harvard Business School and Professor Charles O'Reilly of the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. For an explanation of the Congruence Model, see their book, *Winning Through Innovation,* Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 1997.

hundreds of U.S. public school leaders eager to identify ways to better organize and manage their complex organizations. Although it resembles models used in the business and nonprofit sectors, the framework was designed to fit the unique context and challenges of managing in public education.

The framework assists with achieving coherence by:

1) Connecting the instructional core with a district-wide strategy for improvement

2) Highlighting district elements that can support or hinder effective implementation

3) Identifying interdependencies among district elements

4) Recognizing forces in the environment that have an impact on the implementation of strategy

Figure A below displays The PELP Coherence Framework (Also see **Exhibit 1**)

Figure A
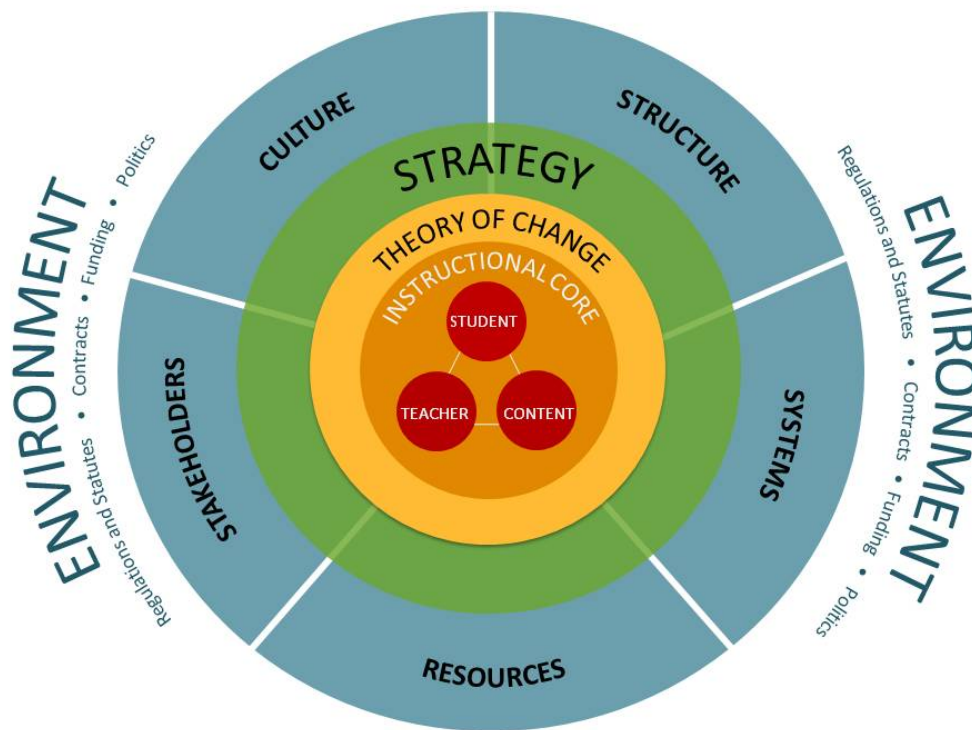
At the center of the framework is the **instructional core**, which represents the critical work of teaching and learning that goes on in classrooms.[2]   The core includes three interdependent

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[2] The "instructional core" builds on the idea of the instructional triangle developed by David K. Cohen and Deborah Lowenberg Ball in their June 1999 paper "Instruction, Capacity, and Improvement", published by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

components: *teachers'* knowledge and skill, *students'* engagement in their own learning, and academically challenging *content*.

Surrounding the instructional core is the **theory of change**. The theory of change, the organization's collective belief about the relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes, is often phrased as an "if… then…" statement or series of such statements. This theory provides the link between the mission of increased performance for all students and the strategy the organization will use to achieve that goal.

Strategy, which surrounds the theory of change in the framework, is the set of actions a district deliberately undertakes to strengthen the instructional core and raise student performance district-wide. In order to make teaching and learning more effective, a district must develop a strategy that enhances all three components of the instructional core and their interaction. However, *how* each district provides this capacity and support to the core may vary. In other words, two districts may design two very different, but equally effective, strategies. The PELP Coherence Framework, rather than prescribing a particular strategy, asserts that gaining coherence among actions at the district, school, and classroom levels will make a district's chosen strategy more scalable and sustainable.

The framework includes five organizational elements critical to the successful implementation of a district-wide improvement strategy: **culture, structures and systems, resources, and stakeholders.** The effectiveness of each of these elements is directly influenced by the actions of district leadership. The outermost layer of the framework represents the **environment** in which districts operate and includes regulations and statutes, contracts, funding, and politics. These factors are primarily outside of the direct control of district leaders, but have the potential to greatly influence district strategy and operations.

The remainder of this note is divided into three sections. First, we share some brief thoughts on the importance of creating a mission, setting objectives, and developing a theory of change about how to create improvement in student outcomes. These three steps facilitate strategy formulation; in turn, strategy drives decisions about each of the organizational elements. In the second section, we discuss the role and characteristics of an effective strategy. Finally, we define and describe each of the framework elements, and provide a set of critical questions that district leaders can use to diagnose their strengths and weaknesses and design action plans in their own pursuit of coherence.

Focusing on What Matters

Mission, Objectives and Milestones

In public school districts, setting performance objectives can be difficult. Districts face competing priorities and demands from multiple constituencies at the local, state, and federal levels. In addition, unlike private sector organizations, school districts are designated producers of a public good in a particular geographic area and cannot choose to serve some customers and not others. Within these constraints however, districts are developing mission statements that target increased performance for *all* students (regardless of race, class, or prior academic performance) as their primary objective. A concrete performance objective for such a mission might be: *By 2012, 80% of students in the district will score in the proficient category or above on state reading and math tests, and there will be no gap between the performance of students of different ethnicities and/or socio-economic status.*

An ambitious long-term objective such as the one above can be made more manageable by setting intermediate milestones between the current performance and the desired performance. Milestones for the one, three, and five year marks allow a district to monitor its progress toward the larger objective, communicate success along the way, and respond to new information as it becomes available. Districts are increasingly breaking annual goals into more granular milestones at the school and classroom level. For example, in one large urban district, leaders underscore "the power of two," meaning if every teacher helps two additional students score proficient on the state reading assessment, the district will meet its annual performance goals for reading.

School districts must design and implement a district-wide strategy in order to fully achieve their objectives and the associated milestones at scale. A theory of change can facilitate effective strategy development.

Theory of Change and the Instructional Core[3]

Articulating an explicit theory of change to link strategy to mission is a useful step in strategy formulation.[4] In this context, a theory of change represents the organization's collective belief about the causal relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes. Some find it useful to think of a theory of change as an "if…then…" statement, or a series of such statements.

In order to achieve their mission of increased performance for all students regardless of race, class, or prior academic performance, leaders in public schools districts should develop theories of change about how to strengthen the instructional core. For example, a number of districts believe deeply that high quality professional development for teachers is the most highly-leveraged way to improve student performance. They articulate their theory of change as: *"The most direct way to increase student learning is to improve teachers' instructional practice. Therefore, if we help all teachers improve their instructional practice, then we will accomplish high levels of achievement for all students."*

This theory of change focuses strategy development by narrowing the range of choices to those actions that people in the district believe have the highest likelihood of increasing achievement levels for all students; namely, decisions that focus resources on those activities aimed at improving the instructional practice of all teachers throughout the district. The above is intended as one example of a prevalent theory of change; a district's own theory of change might be different from this example and be quite effective. Once a leadership team has agreed on a theory of change, they can develop a strategy to put the theory into practice.

Strategy[5]

Strategy is the set of actions a district deliberately takes to provide capacity and support to the instructional core with the objective of raising student performance district-wide. Strategy informs how the people, activities, and resources of a district work together to accomplish a collective purpose. A district must begin at the nucleus of its organization—teaching and learning—and

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[3] This section is adapted from "Note on Strategy in Public Education," PEL-011, by Stacey Childress.

[4] Other methods of strategy formulation exist; for the purposes of this note, the authors use theory of change as one way to develop strategy.

[5] This section is adapted from "Note on Strategy in Public Education," PEL-011. Please refer to this note for a fuller discussion of the characteristics of effective strategy and its role in the public education sector.

develop strategy from the inside-out. A district's improvement strategy should be grounded in providing capacity and support to the three components of the instructional core—teachers' knowledge and skill, student engagement, and academically challenging content.

Having a well articulated strategy helps leaders choose what to do, and just as importantly, what *not* to do. As a result, the district can put its scarce resources to use more effectively. Without a clear strategy, projects tend to be started one after the other, often moving on related, yet disconnected tracks. Programs are launched with fanfare and enthusiasm, and layered on top of existing programs that might not be effective and should have been stopped long ago. Often when district leaders do develop a strategy, they fail to engage others in its formulation or to communicate it effectively. As a result, the strategy remains largely in the heads of the senior managers, and is never fully embraced by the people on the front lines of the organization who are accountable for implementation.

Once a strategy is developed, district leaders must create an organization that supports rather than constrains its implementation. If the strategy is communicated clearly and the organization is designed to support it, the people doing the work are much more likely to understand how their efforts contribute to the overall mission of the district.

At the school level, it is important to understand that *how* a district supports individual schools to implement the strategy and improve student performance may look different from school to school. Districts are increasingly moving away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to managing schools in favor of differentiating treatment in response to unique school needs and characteristics.   For example, one large urban district grants increased autonomy to schools that accept four-year performance contracts; if student achievement and other indicators of school quality fail to improve, the district can remove the principal or close the school. Many districts limit the choices that low-performing schools can make, while others invest additional targeted resources in these schools to build their capacity.

For school districts engaging in differentiated treatment, achieving coherence gains added complexity. It is vital for leaders to define which aspects of the strategy should remain consistent across all schools and which aspects should be adapted for or by individual schools and under what conditions.   At the same time, these districts may find they need more explicit integrating mechanisms, such as cultural norms or a consistent accountability system, to ensure that schools with different decision rights or varying levels of district support maintain a shared commitment to the strategy.

The following critical questions can help district leaders reflect critically on the effectiveness of their strategy to improve student performance.

Critical questions:

- In our district, what do we believe is the most powerful way to drive increased academic performance in every school? In other words, what is the most effective way to strengthen the instructional core—teachers' knowledge and skill, student engagement and academically challenging content? Where do we believe we can achieve the most leverage? (This is our "theory of change.")

- Given the above, what is our strategy for improving student performance throughout the district? Is our strategy consistent with our theory of change? If not, do we need to revise our strategy?

- Based on our strategy, what activities should be consuming our time and resources? What activities and programs currently consume our time and our resources? Are these aligned with our strategy, or are they diverting our focus? Based on our strategy, which activities should we grow, drop or modify?

- Is our strategy clearly communicated and well understood? Do people working in the district office (education and operations departments) understand their role in supporting the strategy? Do principals and teachers from every school understand and embrace the strategy? How do we know? How can we do a better job of communicating our strategy and inspiring people to be committed to implementing it?

- Are there aspects of the strategy that should be common across all schools? Are there aspects of the strategy that should be adapted for or by individual schools? Under what conditions? What criteria will be used to identify different schools' needs and their different decision rights? Do we currently treat some schools differently from other schools—either formally or informally? If so, are we behaving in ways that are consistent with our strategy and the conditions we articulated? Do we have adequate integrating mechanisms?

Framework Elements

Five organizational elements are critical to the successful implementation of a district-wide improvement strategy: **culture, structures and systems, resources, and stakeholders.** The outermost layer of the framework is the district's operating **environment**. Definitions and descriptions for each element follow, as well as critical questions that help district leaders conceptualize how each element would look if it were coherent with the strategy and diagnose any discrepancies in their current state. District leaders should walk away with a better understanding of how their organization is presently supporting (or hindering) strategy execution and with concrete ideas that can be translated into action steps for moving the organization towards greater coherence with the strategy.

Culture[6]

Culture consists of the norms and behaviors in the organization; in other words, everyone's shared understanding of "how things work around here." The public education sector has long had a culture that valued effort more than results. As long as people seemed to be working hard, they could go about their business without being asked to work with colleagues or to be accountable for the performance of their students. At its worst, this type of culture can lead to defeatism among teachers and administrators ("I taught it, but they didn't learn it"). In today's accountability environment, this way of operating is no longer acceptable. As a result, districts must establish a culture of collaboration, high expectations, and accountability.

District leaders often view culture as something amorphous that defies management. However, by taking specific actions such as redefining roles or relationships, altering performance expectations, and using job assignments in creative ways, leaders can upend an entrenched counterproductive culture.

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[6] The sections on culture, structure and systems draw from M.L. Tushman and C.A. O'Reilly, *Winning Through Innovation*, Boston: HBS Press: 2002, M.L. Tushman and D.A. Nadler "A Model for Diagnosing Organizational Behavior," *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1980, and "Organizational Alignment: The 7S model," Jeff Bradach, HBS No. 497-045.

Leaders must engage people in specific behaviors that will reshape their individual beliefs about their own practice and student learning. Substantial empirical research on schools has indicated that "the effectiveness of districts, in terms of student learning and development, is significantly influenced by the quality and characteristics of district culture."[7] Some examples of norms and beliefs to consider are: attitudes about accountability, orientation towards students and staff, conflict resolution methods, the reciprocity between the district office and schools, and the approach to stakeholders.

Critical questions:

- What does our strategy say about our district; in other words, "What do we believe"? As an organization, do we behave in ways that are consistent with these beliefs, or in contradictory ways?

- What behaviors are needed from people throughout the district to implement our strategy (e.g. risk-taking, collaboration, problem-solving, etc.)? How can we model these desired behaviors for our people? How can we give them opportunities to apply these behaviors in their daily work?

- What norms should be established to support the desired behaviors (e.g. tolerance for mistakes that further organizational learning, an attitude of service for schools, etc.)? What actions can we take to embed these norms in the way we work and interact? What do our current norms and behaviors suggest about our existing culture? Does our existing culture support or hinder our ability to implement our strategy?

Structures and Systems

Although structures and systems are separate components of our framework, we learned through extensive work in school districts that they are so interdependent that is most effective to discuss them together. They include things such as roles and responsibilities, reporting relationships, teams, accountability mechanisms, compensation arrangements, resource allocation methods, organizational learning processes, and training programs. Districts have usually developed systems and structures haphazardly to support generation after generation of reform efforts. These systems and structures tend to stay in place long after the fad they were built for has passed from the scene. As a result, systems and structures do not reinforce each other and often constrain rather than enable high performance. To effectively support a strategy, the structures and systems often have to be reinvented.

Structure helps define how the work of the district gets done. It includes how people are organized, who has responsibility and accountability for results, and who makes or influences decisions. Structures can be both formal and informal.

Formal structures Formal structures are deliberately established organizational forms that can be either relatively permanent or temporary. Examples of permanent structures are departments reflected on an organizational chart or standing groups such as the superintendent's cabinet. Temporary structures are time-limited, as is often the case with task forces or cross-functional teams established to plan or implement a new project or program.

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[7] Robert G. Owens, *Organizational Behavior in Education* (Needham Heights: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 175

Structural decisions can often hinder rather than support effective implementation of strategy. For example, many districts separate the organizational units that deliver professional development from the line management of schools. This arrangement makes it difficult to hold principals accountable for the professional development activities in their own schools, and for principals to hold professional developers accountable for school level objectives.

A word of caution is in order. Historically, the public education sector has relied too heavily on formal structural changes alone to drive improvement. A classic example is the debate over how "tightly" a district office should manage its relationship with schools, usually seen as a dichotomy between centralization and decentralization. Advocates tend to decry whatever default structure exists as the primary reason for poor performance. If districts are heavily decentralized and underperforming, then leaders (especially newly arrived ones) blame the structure for a lack of focus and discipline and move quickly to centralize authority and control to the central office. The reverse is true when leaders find a highly centralized structure and a poor performing district – they push decisions about resources and programs out to principals, ostensibly freeing them from the burdens imposed by a centralized bureaucracy that is out of touch with the needs of schools.

Both arguments have merit, but neither is "the answer." Organizational structure should be designed to support the effective implementation of a strategy for improvement, and framing structural design questions as a debate over centralized or decentralized power is too simplistic and usually misses the point – people at all levels of the district have a role to play in improving performance. Decisions about structure should put *performance* at the center of the debate, rather than power, politics, or ideology.

Informal structures and power Informal structures—the way decisions get made or the way people work and interact outside of formal channels--can be as (or even more) powerful than formal structures. Informal structures can be either positive—principals calling each other to share ideas— or negative—decisions get made by people "in the know" instead of through established working groups. While formal power is primarily based on rank or position, informal power is garnered and reinforced through social networks. Informal power can be difficult to manage because it is usually earned or developed through tenure, expertise or competence.[8] District leadership can have some influence over informal power by creating developmental committee assignments and job rotations, which allow individuals to gain informal power.

Since those who possess informal power have considerable influence over the behavior of others in the district, it is important for the leadership team to assess how this power can either be leveraged or needs to be mitigated in order to accomplish the strategy.[9] For example, individuals with strong informal power can help champion organizational values (e.g. collaboration) or potentially controversial initiatives; by the same token, they can be powerful roadblocks. The same holds true for informal structures; some can be leveraged while others may need to be disrupted. Asking questions such as, "Who do you go to when you really need to get something done?" or "How do things *really* work around here?" can help reveal informal structures and sources of power.

Systems School districts manage themselves through a variety of systems, which are the processes and procedures through which work gets done. Some systems are formally designed by

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[8] See Linda A. Hill, "Influence as Exchange," HBS No. 497-049 for a discussion of networks and sources of informal power.

[9] See W.E. Baker, *Networking Smart: How to Build Relationships for Personal and Organizational Success*, New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1994 for examples of proactive and explicit strategies used to manage informal networks.

the district, while others emerge informally in practice. Whether formal or informal, the purpose of systems is to increase the district's efficiency and effectiveness in implementing strategy.

Systems are built around such important functions as career development and promotion, compensation, student assignment, resource allocation, organizational learning, and measurement and accountability. Most practically, systems help people feel like they do not have to "reinvent the wheel" when they need to get an important, and often multi-step, task done.

For example, in the wake of unprecedented amounts of student performance data, many districts talk about the desire to increase "data-driven decision making," yet many schools lack the expertise or capacity to do this well. One large urban district recently unveiled a year-long "school quality review" process that trains school staff how to form hypotheses to explain the root causes of poor performance, put interventions in place and evaluate their progress. The school quality reviews represent an important system for strengthening organizational learning and the capacity to drive improvement among those closest to the students.

School districts also must develop systems to comply with myriad external requirements even if these systems do not drive strategy implementation. For instance, federal regulations such as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) and desegregation legislation have required that school districts develop systems and processes to address these external demands. The emphasis on accountability has also put pressure on districts to develop complex systems to better track and manage student performance data.

Critical questions:

- Which roles are critical to implementing our strategy? How do these roles and responsibilities need to be defined? What skills and knowledge do people in these roles need to be successful?

- Which reporting relationships would be most beneficial for implementing our strategy? How can these relationships be made clear to everyone? How are we currently organized? Who reports to whom and why? What is the span of control of our key middle managers?

- What informal structures or sources of power are influential in the district? Are they helping or hindering strategy implementation? How do we make decisions, particularly ones that impact schools? Who is involved? How do we solicit input from others? How do we communicate our decisions? How can decision-making be more transparent and coherent?

- When will we need cross-functional collaboration? How can we effectively structure this (e.g. ongoing teams, short-term task forces, updates, etc.)? What existing structures or practices need to be modified to facilitate this?

- How can we recruit and select people aligned with our strategy? How can we design and deliver professional development programs that are in line with our strategy and that provide value to teachers and administrators?

- Do we have a rigorous process in place to facilitate continuous learning among our educators and administrators? How might we create a system that enables people to analyze student data in order to improve performance? If we had such a system, do our people have the

capacity to make effective decisions based on the results of their analysis? What is our plan for ensuring that this capacity exists at every school in the district?

- What types of accountability mechanisms are needed to help everyone feel responsible for driving improved student outcomes? How will we measure our performance? Over the long-term? On an interim basis? Have we defined what success looks like (or "what we're trying to accomplish") at the district, school and classroom level? Are we measuring and communicating our progress?

- How can performance evaluation be used to help people focus on the work required to implement our strategy? Can compensation be used as an incentive to meet performance goals? Should these incentives target individuals, groups or both?

- What systems do we need to help people get their work done more effectively and efficiently? Are any of our systems overly cumbersome and/or outdated given our strategy?

Resources

Money is usually the first thing leaders think about when resources are mentioned. Money is obviously important, but organizational resources also include people and physical assets such as technology and data. District leaders must allocate the full range of resources in ways that are coherent with the district's strategy in order to implement it effectively. This means being disciplined about which current and planned activities receive necessary resources, and just as importantly, which ones do not. Because district resources are usually quite constrained, freeing up the resources necessary to fully invest in activities that are coherent with the strategy usually means cutting off the flow to others.

People District budgets typically allocate nearly 80% of their expenses to the salaries and benefits of the people in the organization. At the school level, the average is closer to 90%. Given this, district and school leaders must think rigorously about how to deploy the organization's most valuable asset: its people. This includes a serious look at the skills and knowledge that people need in order to successfully implement the strategy, and an analysis that reveals any gaps between what people know how to do and what the strategy requires of them.

For example, if the knowledge and skill of teachers is believed to be the most highly-leveraged component in the instructional core, the district must invest heavily in achieving coherence in this area. In addition to investing directly in professional development, some districts are more actively influencing personnel assignments. For example, some innovative leaders are finding ways to encourage and support highly-skilled educators in taking on challenging assignments such as leading or teaching in a chronically low-performing school. Often this requires changes to collective bargaining agreements that use seniority as the primary factor in allocating people to jobs – this can be difficult, but worth the effort.

Financial resources Districts are also rethinking how financial resources flow throughout the organization so that they are more coherent with the strategy and more likely to produce desired outcomes. This can take a variety of forms, such as setting benchmarks for what percentage of total funds must be spent in schools versus at the central office or establishing ratios for instructional to non-instructional expenses. In some cases, leaders are challenging fundamental assumptions, such as the notion that every child costs the same to educate. In a number of districts, this thinking has led to the implementation of a "weighted student formula" that attaches a dollar amount to each individual

student based on a set of characteristics (i.e. prior academic performance, family income, and grade-level). The money then follows the student to his or her school, and schools receive their annual resources based on their unique student enrollments. Whether or not such a formula makes sense should be considered in light of a district-wide strategy for improvement. However, thinking creatively about how money flows around the organization is critical to implementing strategy.

Technology Building the technology infrastructure necessary to support annual reporting demands from external accountability mechanisms is important. It is also critical to invest in technology to manage student performance data on a more frequent basis in order to support organizational processes that require teachers and administrators to use data to make better instructional decisions. Many districts are requiring every school to administer benchmark assessments three to four times per year and to use the data for continuous improvement. To support this, strategic investments in data warehouses, assessment and analysis tools, and knowledge management applications are necessary. They can save teachers an enormous amount of time required for administrative tasks, and help them make more effective instructional decisions that are directly responsive to their students' learning needs.

Critical questions:

- How can we allocate our resources to be more coherent with our strategy? What assumptions about students and their learning needs are reflected in the way we manage and allocate resources? Do we continue to financially support activities, departments, or programs that are inconsistent with our strategy? Do we need to modify contracts or agreements with bargaining units in order to more effectively allocate personnel?

- What knowledge and skill do district and school staff need to implement our strategy? What is the gap between what they know and what we are asking them to do now? What will it take to close this gap?

- How can we think more strategically about matching people's experience and knowledge with roles and assignments that are critical to the strategy? Do we have a full enough understanding of what are people know and can do so that we could make sound matches of experience and opportunity? If not, how can we develop this?

- Do we have the technology infrastructure we need to not only meet external reporting demands, but to capture and analyze data in a way that allows people at all levels of the organization to make better decisions about improving the teaching and learning that happens in classrooms? Do we have a clear understanding of who needs what data to be more effective in their roles? If not, how can we develop this?

- Do we have a clear framework for deciding when we should build technology tools ourselves and when we should buy them from a capable vendor?

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are people and groups inside and outside the organization who have a legitimate interest in the system and can influence the effectiveness of the strategy. These include teachers' unions, parents, students, school boards, community and advocacy groups, and local politicians and policymakers. Managing stakeholder relationships in a way that is coherent with the strategy is

especially challenging because stakeholders rarely agree on what success looks like. District leaders must either persuade a majority of stakeholder groups to back the strategy or, at the very least, secure the backing of one or two with enough power to prevent the others from becoming a disruptive force.

Stakeholder Categories

- **District and school staff –** all paid employee groups throughout the organization

- **Governing bodies**– boards, committees, and/or political figures that set and administer district policies, e.g., board of education, mayor, local school site councils

- **Unions and associations** – local, state, and national collective bargaining units, e.g., teacher unions, administrator professional associations, custodial unions

- **Parents and parent organizations –** Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Parents for Public Schools, individual parents, parent volunteers

- **Students –** formal student leaders or groups, temporary coalitions formed around a specific cause or individual students

- **Civic and community leaders and organizations** – chambers of commerce, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), politicians, local business leaders, local and national foundations, nonprofits, churches

Critical questions:

- Who are our stakeholders? Which stakeholders will be affected by the strategy and how? Which stakeholders can have an impact (positive or negative) on the implementation of the strategy?   How can we think about prioritizing and/or sequencing our stakeholder relationships? Who are our most natural allies? Our most influential ones?

- Is our strategy well understood by all stakeholders? How can we help them better understand their role in supporting our strategy? Are any stakeholders causing us to pursue activities that are incoherent with (or not central to) our strategy?

- How might we best communicate our progress to our stakeholders in a way that garners their support and their willingness to influence other stakeholders and the environment that are coherent with our strategy? How can we proactively manage our relationships with stakeholders so that they will want to contribute to our success?

Environment

A district's environment includes all of the external factors that can have an impact on strategy, operations and performance. The environment in which public school districts operate includes the various funding sources available (both public and private), the political and policy context at the city, state, and national levels, the collective bargaining arrangements in place, and the characteristics of their particular community.

District leaders have little direct control over the environment, but must spend significant time trying to manage its effects in order to consistently implement a district-wide strategy. The

environment can have an impact on districts by enforcing nonnegotiable demands, constraining decision making, limiting resources, evaluating performance, and imposing sanctions. However, the environment can also serve as an enabler if district leadership can influence these regulatory and statutory, contractual, financial, and political forces that surround them.

District leaders must consider the factors in the environment and determine how those factors, singly or collectively, create demands, constraints, or opportunities that have an impact on their ability to implement their strategy.[10] The categories of the environment in the PELP Coherence Framework are:[11]

1. **Regulations and statutes**—legal and regulatory influences on the district, e.g., board election policies, mandates from state departments of education, *No Child Left Behind* legislation

2. **Contracts** – agreements between the district and various bargaining units that have an impact on strategy and operations

3. **Funding** – all sources of revenue available to the district, both public and private, including local and state tax levies, categorical funds for state and federal programs, and grants from individuals and foundations

4. **Politics** – the political landscape in which the district operates, including local governance dynamics, the relative power of special interest groups, state-wide debates regarding issues such as choice and accountability, and electoral politics at the local, state and federal levels

Critical questions:

- How can we effectively align external actors (e.g. foundations, community leaders) in support of our strategy? Do we need to realign (or pull back from) the efforts of any external actors to better support our strategy?

- What funding sources (public and private) are available to us? How can the terms of these sources be made most beneficial? What would it take to achieve this?

- What federal, state and local policies would be most beneficial to implementing our strategy? What is the most effective approach to advocating for these? Are there any regulations or statutes that are constraining our ability to implement our strategy that we can advocate to change? Are there any ways we could better leverage existing regulations or statutes?

- What contractual arrangement with our bargaining units would be most beneficial? What would it take to achieve this? Are there any levers for change that we are not currently exercising?

- How would we like our community to perceive us; what is our "brand" (e.g. best district in the city, affordable with quality, etc.)? What is the gap between how we would like to be perceived and how we are perceived? How can we improve our image?

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[10] Adapted from M.L. Tushman and D.L. Nadler, "A Model for Diagnosing Organizational Behavior," *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1980, p. 41.

[11] Please note that the examples are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to clarify some of the categories of environmental factors that exist in public education.

- What are the key political influences on the district? How do these impact our strategy? Ideally, how can we leverage these influences to our advantage?

Conclusion

The PELP Coherence Framework is designed to focus the attention of public school district leaders on the central problem of increasing the achievement levels of all students by making all the parts of a large district work in concert with its strategy. The framework can be useful when evaluating or changing an existing strategy, as well as when developing a new one. By providing a common language and consistent way to address the challenge of creating (and sustaining) coherence, the PELP Coherence Framework can help leaders build high-performing school districts that improve educational outcomes for every student, in every school. This mission is no longer lofty or optional given today's heightened accountability environment; it is simply the job public school districts are expected to perform.

Exhibit 1 PELP Coherence Framework
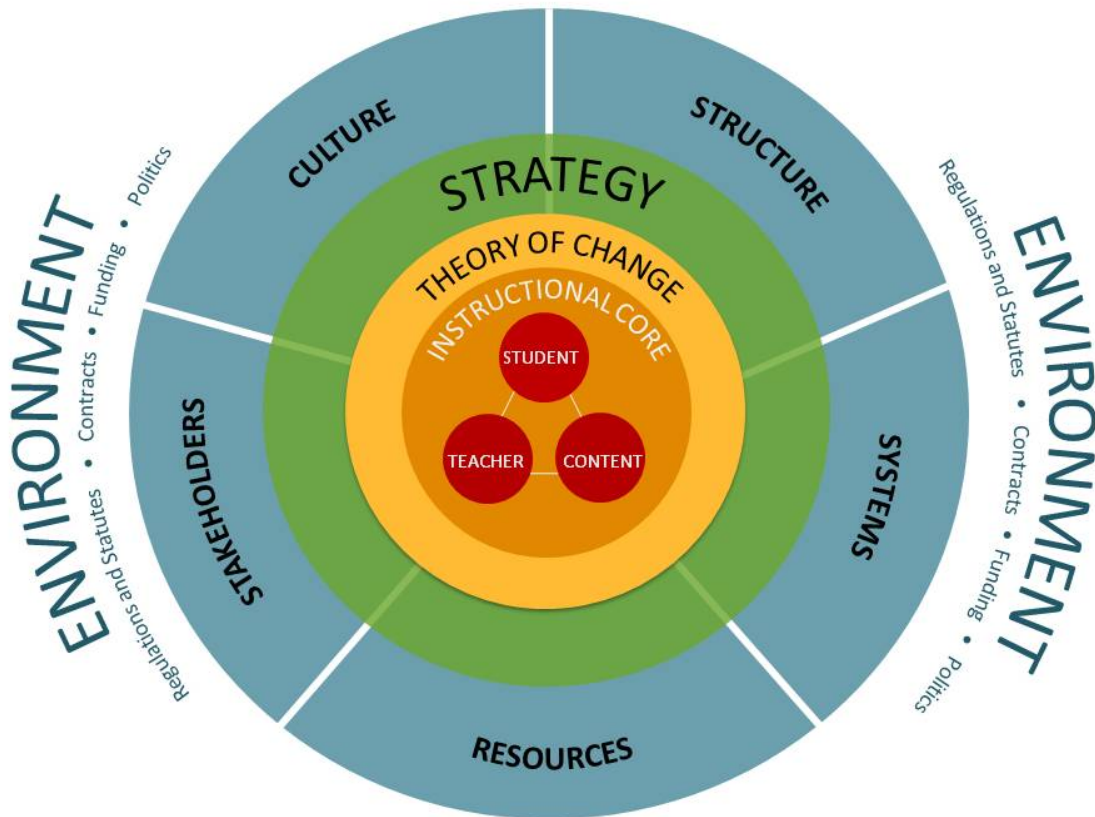
Adapted from Tushman and O'Reilly's Congruence Model, 2002