

What Is Working Systemically?

Most of us can recall a few facts about icebergs from our elementary school geography class. Perhaps among these recalled facts is that approximately seven eighths of an iceberg mass lies below the surface of the water and only a small portion of the iceberg is visible above the surface. The expression “tip of the iceberg” is used to describe a problem as it is viewed superficially; the larger manifestation of the problem lies below the surface.

What do icebergs have to do with systemic change in education? Senge (2000) uses the iceberg analogy to suggest that systems thinkers must look below the surface of events to solve school problems. Currently, systems thinkers look first at the history of the event to identify trends and patterns in the behavior of an organization. While identification of these trends and patterns is important in determining key variables over time, this information is inadequate to ascertain the root cause of the problem.

For deeper understanding, Senge suggests that examination of systemic structures often reveals underlying forces (and interactions among these forces) that contribute to trends and patterns in organizational behavior. At this level, one can discover fundamental aspects of the system that are producing the behavior over time.

Senge also suggests that systemic thinkers go even further and consider the mental models existing within the organization that perpetuate the systemic structures that impede problem solving. Such mental models, which are shaped by the values, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals within the organization, influence individual and collective notions of how the district or school should work. Senge suggests systemic thinkers go beyond recognizing such models to questioning their validity. Challenging these mental models often helps get to the root cause of the problem and set the organization on the path toward systemic change.

What, then, does systemic thinking have to do with district and school improvement? In 2004, Dennis Sparks, former executive director of the National Staff Development Council, noted that

Every system is specifically designed to produce the results it is getting. The interconnectedness of all parts of the educational



A Note from the Director

The Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC), our partners, and our clients have been hard at work since the last issue of this newsletter! As you will see, we’ve worked together to provide professional development, create plans, build relationships, and establish an overarching framework and focus on our future work together.

Our feature article on working systemically to improve quality learning describes this framework. We provide the research background and rationale for this approach as well as the key features of a systemic approach to school improvement. This approach was also the focus of this year’s TXCC Annual Forum held in San Antonio in late June. You can read more about that event in this newsletter or on the TXCC Web site (<http://txcc.sedl.org>).

We invite you to learn about the experiences of the Texas and New York teams who attended the Restructuring Retreat co-sponsored by the TXCC, the New York Comprehensive Center (NYCC), and the Center on Innovation and Improvement. The goals and outcomes of that event are described in the article *The Journey to Restructuring Under NCLB: What Works When?* The relationships built during the retreat continue today.

Finally, as in past issues of this newsletter, we highlight the work of one of our education service center (ESC) partners, the Region 10 ESC. Read about its staff’s efforts to collaborate not only with the TXCC, but also among themselves and with clients. We’ve also included information about our own professional development activities.

We hope you find the newsletter informative and, as always, invite your feedback and comments.

WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL!

Vicki Dimock, PhD
Director, TXCC

enterprise means classrooms, schools, and school districts are tied together in a web of relationships in which decisions and actions in any one part affect the other parts and the system as a whole. (p. 245)

Working systemically for educational improvement thus means “giving attention to the interrelationships among multiple aspects of the system so that each is supportive of the others” (Cowan, 2006, p. 597).

Between 2000 and 2005, SEDL tested and refined an approach for working systemically at the district, school, and classroom levels in 23 districts and 49 schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas (SEDL & Charles A. Dana Center, 2005). Districts represented rural, suburban, and urban settings, and all had at least one low-performing school. The Working Systemically approach was designed to overcome shortcomings of the following previous approaches to school improvement as noted by Sashkin and Egermeier (1993): fixing the parts (e.g., purchasing a new reading and math program and expecting it, by itself, to result in higher student achievement); fixing the people (e.g., sending teachers to a one-time training and expecting them to implement new knowledge and skills without a plan for ongoing support); and fixing the school (e.g., adopting a new school reform model without accounting for ongoing staff learning and resources needed to maintain the model).

Using a group of external facilitators, SEDL focused its attention on the state, district, school, and classroom levels while addressing specific components of the system that have the most impact on quality learning—standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, resources, policy and governance, family and community, and professional staff. The intent was to have the levels of the system aligned with and supportive of one another as they dealt with each of the components.

To address these components effectively, facilitators had to help district and school staff discover, within their own system, existing trends and patterns, systemic structures, and mental models that perpetuated the status quo. The improvement work entailed multiple types of interactions with district, school, and classroom leaders to build essential competencies—creating coherence; collecting, interpreting, and using data; ensuring continuous professional learning; building relationships; and responding to changing conditions—that would sustain the improvement work over time.

The Working Systemically approach thus acknowledges interactions among the levels of the system (the “who”), the essential components for improvement (the “what”), and the critical competencies for leading improvement (the “how”) in



ESC Notables

The staff at the Region 10 ESC model collaboration in their work with the TXCC, one another, and their clients. Cheryl Rischer, the Region 10 leadership and school improvement specialist, has taken care to ensure that the appropriate ESC staff attend the instructional strand professional development sessions offered by the TXCC. Mathematics, science, and English language learner specialists have attended all of the TXCC professional development sessions. The Region 10 staff take advantage of the time offered to collaborate at these sessions, working diligently to develop and refine plans to implement what they’ve learned when they return to their office. The culture of Region 10 reflects the value the staff place on collaboration. The Region 10 director attempts to make certain that all training events are attended by at least two staff members. Quarterly meetings among content specialists are held formally, but informal collaborative planning meetings are also common, whether scheduled and planned or on the fly in the hallway.

The payoff of the shared learning and planning was apparent at a recent ESC professional development offering at the Region 10 facilities. Becky Chairez, English Language Learner (ELL) specialist, and Scott Townsend, science specialist, offered a professional development session titled *ELL Strategies for Secondary Science* to educators in their region. The session was full of interactive and engaging activities that stressed the importance of addressing the specific needs of struggling second language students. The session provided information about how to use TAKS data to improve instruction for ELLs and how to recognize students’ language proficiency levels. Participants spent a good deal of time learning about language objectives and working together to write language objectives for science lessons. They also worked together to identify effective ELL strategies in a sample science lesson plan.

The ease with which Becky and Scott worked together was evident to their attendees, as information about ELL strategies were seamlessly woven into the science instructional strategies. Kudos to Becky, Scott, and Cheryl for a job well done!



its approach. The TXCC is using this approach as it collaborates with ESC staff in the coming year.

The TXCC will provide technical assistance to ESC staff as they work with selected districts and schools on the five phases of SEDL's systemic approach: (1) understanding the system, (2) analyzing the system, (3) planning action, (4) taking action and monitoring implementation, and (5) assessing and reflecting on outcomes. By examining and responding to more than just "the tip of the iceberg," expected outcomes in the targeted districts and schools are increased alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to state standards; deeper collaboration on teaching and learning; improved professional development that affects classroom practice; and strong leadership for the improvement of teaching and learning.

References

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TXCC Annual Forum

Working Systemically: The District's Role in School Improvement

The focus of this year's TXCC Annual Forum was geared toward the district's roles and responsibilities in school improvement as requested by Texas Education Agency (TEA) staff. SEDL's Working Systemically approach correlates well with that goal and provided the framework for the forum. It will continue to guide our future work with the ESCs. Attendees included ESC staff involved in school improvement initiatives and district staff interested in learning more about a systemic approach to school improvement.

Sam Redding of the Center on Innovation and Improvement addressed the district's role in school improvement. Anita Villarreal and Sally Partridge of TEA worked together to



TXCC Quarterly Highlights

TXCC's recent events and activities

★ In March, ESC leadership staff attended *Coaching for Success for Leaders*. This session was designed to assist participants as they work to build the capacity of school leaders. TXCC shared strategies related to promoting conversation and collaboration focused on learning; building questioning skills to further teachers' thinking about instructional practice and its impact on student outcomes; and instilling habits of reflection to increase organizational effectiveness on campuses.

★ In April, part 2 of *Strategies for English Language Learners in Secondary Science* was presented. This session continued our previous work with the ESC staff in incorporating research-based and promising practices for ELLs in secondary science courses. The ELL and science specialists have attended these instructional professional development sessions. These teams had an opportunity to learn and plan together and were encouraged to continue the collaboration at their worksites.



★ *Leadership Skills for Resolving Conflict* was a professional development session offered to the leadership staff at the ESCs in May. The focus of this session was preparing participants to use a facilitator guide for assisting educational leaders in resolving conflicts related to school improvement. Bill Sommers discussed years of research as well as his own experience as a principal. The specific topics addressed included:



- Five Causes for T-Up Conflict
- Emotional Blackmailing and How to Avoid Traps
- Meta-Model
- How to Deal With People You Can't Stand
- Five Dysfunctions of Teams
- Polarity Management
- How Not to Get Shot Delivering Bad News

★ The theme of this year's TXCC Annual Forum was "Working Systemically: The District's Role in School Improvement." The event was held June 20–21 at the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio. For more information on the forum, please see the article on this page.

present the requirements of Title I School Improvement and the resources available to those schools entering school improvement. Cory Green of TEA encouraged participants to “Do the Right Thing.” We also hosted guest speakers from other federally funded resource centers serving Texas: Aurelio Montemayor of the Parental Information and Resource Center; Julie Kowal of Public Impact; Kristin Mitchell of REL Southwest; and Bradley Scott from the Equity Assistance Center. The lion’s share of the forum was dedicated to introducing attendees to the Working Systemically approach. Attendees actively participated in specially designed activities to learn about the five competencies teachers and leaders in a system must build and maintain to support a functioning system: (1) collecting, using, and interpreting data, (2) creating coherence, (3) responding to changing conditions, (4) building relationships, and (5) ensuring continuous professional learning.



To learn more about this year’s TXCC Annual Forum or to download facilitator materials, visit our Web site at <http://txcc.sedl.org>.



The Journey to Restructuring Under NCLB: What Works When?

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for 2 years to progress through specific stages of improvement. Among the stages are corrective action and restructuring, which are aimed at getting schools back on course to meet the proficiency standards. Unfortunately, as the level of acceptable proficiency increases each year, more and more schools struggle to meet the rising standards.

In anticipation of the increasing number of schools going into the later stages of school improvement, TEA requested that the TXCC coordinate, lead, and facilitate a meeting with other large states to develop a state plan for schools entering restructuring.

In close cooperation with the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII), the TXCC initiated a search to identify states with similar challenges and needs. The New York Comprehensive Center (NYCC) and New York State Education Department (NYSED) immediately responded to the invitation and offered to host the meeting in New York City.

A partnership developed among the NYCC, TXCC, and CII. After several conference calls and consultations with the state education agencies (SEAs), the following objectives were developed for the 2-day retreat:

- Identify research supporting optimal restructuring options
- Identify and clarify the role the SEAs should play in supporting school restructuring
- Enhance SEA technical assistance for helping districts manage school restructuring that improves student learning
- Develop recommendations that will guide the next level of work

Once the objectives were identified and agreed on, the three centers worked together to develop a plan. It was determined that the state agency representatives would be provided with 2 days of sheltered time to review a synthesis of the research on restructuring options. Additional time was built in to collaborate and develop state restructuring implementation plans.

While the centers were developing the details of the 2-day meeting, the SEAs were identifying the appropriate people to attend the working retreat. Ten Texans traveled to New York City for the meeting, which was held February 13–14, 2007. Two people came from TEA:

- Cory Green, senior director for the Division of NCLB Program Coordination
- Anita Villarreal, director of the Title I, Part A, School Improvement Program in NCLB Program Coordination

Five people came from the statewide School Improvement Resource Center (SIRC), which works most closely with schools that have not met AYP for 2 years or more:

- Sally Partridge, coordinator
- Chris Shade and Liz Garcia, specialists in restructuring
- Al Cogburn and Roger Barrus, technical assistance providers and campus administrator mentors

One representative came from Title I Statewide School Support and Parental Involvement, which assists schools that have not met AYP for 1 year:

- Terri Stafford, coordinator

One representative came from the ESCs, which provide technical assistance to all schools seeking to improve student achievement:

- Jayne Tavenner, component director, Region 6

One person came representing the districts:

- Nancy Vaughan, assistant superintendent for instructional services, Decatur ISD

In addition to the state team, the TXCC sent four staff members to lead and facilitate the meeting.

The New York team consisted of eight representatives from the New York State Education Department.

A collaborative climate quickly developed at the meeting. It became apparent that the teams came ready to work to address the challenge. They reviewed the research, considered different options available, and developed draft action plans. On the final afternoon, the teams presented their draft plans to one another. Suggestions and other ideas were offered for consideration by each team. Before adjourning, follow-up meetings were scheduled to continue work on the restructuring plans in the respective states.

After returning to Texas, the SIRC team developed and refined the plan even further, using feedback from the New York team. All of the original members of the team met again 2 months later in Austin to provide feedback.

By bringing together appropriate attendees, the teams were successful in developing and refining state plans using the latest research and best practices. The retreat also set the stage for continuing collaboration among the TXCC, the NYCC, and the CII. And of course, attending a Broadway show on a snowy New York evening was an added bonus for all!



In June, the U.S. Department of Education hosted the National Summit on Supplemental Educational Services (SES) and Public School Choice. States, districts, SES providers, comprehensive centers, parents, and federal staff shared tips and strategies for better implementation of the SES and school choice provisions of NCLB. At the event, the results of a study on the achievement of students participating in SES and school choice were released.



On TEA's Web site

Links to Important Information on TEA's Web Site

NCLB E-mail List

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/list.html

If you haven't already, visit this page to subscribe to TEA's NCLB e-mail list. Get the latest information as soon as it is released! Published weekly by Cory Green, senior director for the Division of NCLB Program Coordination

Due Dates and Deadlines

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/deadlines.html

Don't be late! You'll find the deadlines for NCLB forms and reports on this page.

Student Assessment Data

www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/reporting/

Here you can view and/or download results for the state, regions, districts, and campuses.

2007–2008 Schools in Need of Improvement

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/titleia/sip/2007-08/2007-08_sip.html

Available here will be the final list of campuses in Title I School Improvement for the 2007-2008 school year. Additional information regarding requirements for schools at the different stages of school improvement and a sample parent notification letter may also be found on this page.

Distinguished Performance Schools

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/titleia/distingschools.html

Access information about the 129 schools in Texas that earned the Distinguished Performance Award and the 13 campuses that earned the Distinguished Progress Award.

NCLB Staff Contacts by Region

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/contacts.html

Need help? You can find the e-mail address for your NCLB program contact on this page.

The study found that

- participation in these programs (SES and school choice) was highest among elementary grade students;
- Black students had the highest participation rates in SES and school choice; and
- students participating in SES experienced statistically significant gains in reading and math achievement.

For more information about this report, go to www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports.html#title.

In May, Secretary Spellings announced that two more states have been approved to use growth-based accountability models. Iowa has been approved to use its growth model for the 2006–2007 school year. Ohio is conditionally approved based on the state’s adoption of a uniform minimum group size for all subgroups in AYP determinations for the 2006–2007 school year.

The department intends to approve no more than 10 models for the pilot program. In 2006, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Delaware, and Florida received approval. With the addition of Ohio and Iowa, three slots remain. For more information on the growth model pilot go to www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/growthmodel.



Upcoming Events

Upcoming TXCC events

**September 10-11
Follow-up of the TXCC Annual Forum**

This session will review information about Working Systemically competencies provided at the 2nd Annual TXCC Forum in San Antonio, and revisit issues relevant to Working Systemically, Phase I: Understanding the System which was discussed at the July 18-20 session in Austin.

**September 18-20
Texas Education Agency’s NCLB Update for the Educational Service Centers**

Working Systemically, Phase II: Analyzing the System

Regional Meetings

Regional Meetings are scheduled professional development sessions in which TXCC staff will travel to selected regions to provide professional development. The meetings will begin with a half-day session in which the TXCC and ESC staff work and plan together. The following day will consist of a day-long session during which identified district/school staff will meet with the TXCC and ESC staff to learn about and work through the Working Systemically processes. The meetings will conclude with another half-day session to allow the ESC and TXCC staff to debrief the district/school session and plan for follow-up sessions.

October 8 - 10
El Paso, Region 19

October 16 - 18
Houston, Region 4

October 22 - 24
Richardson, Region 10 and Kilgore, Region 7

October 29 - 31
Edinburg, Region 1

November 5 - 7
Fort Worth, Region 11

For more information and updates on these professional development sessions, visit our Web site at <http://txcc.sedl.org>.

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The Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) is one of 16 regional centers established by the U.S. Department of Education. The primary goal of the regional centers is to build the capacity of the state education agencies and statewide systems of support to implement NCLB. Links to the other regional centers, the content centers, and the U.S. Department of Education may be found on the TXCC Web site (<http://txcc.sedl.org>).

The contents of this newsletter were developed under grant number S283B050020 from the Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.