Creating Coherence in the Working Systemically Approach

Coherence - Coherence is a state of the system in which the agents share meaning, are aligned with a system-wide identity, minimize the “friction” of their interactions, and function in complementary ways.\(^1\)

Have you ever visited a district or school in which the staff are working hard but seem to be running in different directions? The staff may appear to lack a common focus and goals. They seem puzzled that their well-intentioned hard work isn’t paying off in terms of increased student achievement. The school system adopts policies, programs, and practices that aren’t coordinated or that even conflict with other adopted policies, programs, and practices. Resources are scattered rather than thoughtfully directed toward clearly identified needs. Instructional efforts are varied and lack the necessary system of support required for effective and sustained implementation.

Too often, districts and schools exhibit one or more of the above characteristics. Their efforts to improve student achievement do not yield the expected results. Why does this happen? A lack of coherence may be the culprit.

Research suggests that when coherence improves, student achievement improves (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). SEDL’s Working Systemically approach incorporates the concept of coherence along with several other competencies in its design to improve school systems and ultimately student achievement.

In the Working Systemically approach, coherence refers to the ability of district and school leaders to actively support a coordinated effort to align the system’s components so that they complement one another to maximize student learning. Creating Coherence is one of the following five core competencies addressed in the Working Systemically approach:

- Creating Coherence
- Collecting, Interpreting, and Using Data\(^2\)
- Ensuring Continuous Professional Learning
- Building Relationships
- Responding to Changing Conditions

These competencies are continually developed as staff work on the components of the system: Standards, Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, Resources, Professional Staff, Policy and Governance, and Family and Community. Additionally, each level of the system—Classroom, School, District, Intermediate Agencies, State, and National—is addressed.\(^3\)

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2 For more information on this competency, see Texas Focus 1.4.

3 For an overview of the Working Systemically approach, see Texas Focus 1.3.
Low-performing schools and districts often take on a piecemeal approach when responding to state and federal accountability mandates. When a need is identified, a "quick fix" is selected. When many quick-fix efforts are implemented, the result is often a fragmented and incoherent scheme of reforms that brings about few lasting results. Additionally, teachers and administrators lack clarity regarding alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments to state standards. Thus, the system of instruction and professional development becomes fragmented and incomplete, leading to poor student performance on high-stakes tests.

In the Working Systemically process, systemwide coherence is built from the beginning. In the Understanding the System phase, a district support team, which is made up of leaders from all levels of the local system, is formed and begins its work together to collect and analyze various types of data to determine the system's most critical needs. The team gathers input from various stakeholders. This process ensures that (1) all voices influence the determination of the system's challenges and, eventually, the system's efforts to improve; and (2) hard facts and figures rather than hunches and conjecture are used to ascertain challenges and solutions. Engaging stakeholders at many levels in collaborative, purposeful improvement work is essential for coherence.

Coherence continues to be addressed in the Planning Action phase, in which the district support team works to create a district improvement plan. Focused research, data analysis, and thoughtful planning help ensure that the plan is developed around important goals and that the components of the plan are well coordinated to address the identified needs. Components of the plan that involve instructional improvement are focused on alignment issues surrounding curriculum, instruction, and assessments with resources appropriately allocated to support for proper implementation and sustainability.

Throughout the remaining phases of the work, staff continue to create coherence. As the school and district staff carry out the actions of the plan, the district support team continues to meet on a regular basis, promoting the coherent course of the work as it progresses. Meanwhile, leaders learn to communicate clear expectations, build capacity, and monitor and provide feedback. Communicating clear expectations, in both words and actions, reinforces the notion that the system is persistently working as one unit toward a common goal. Building capacity refers to the leaders' responsibility for ensuring that individual staff members possess the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out the work. Leaders regularly assess the capacity of those individuals and ensure they receive the support and training they need. Continual monitoring of the plan's implementation and impact and keeping critical decision makers apprised of progress will ensure that the agreed-upon goals are accomplished and coherence is preserved. As challenges and obstacles arise—as they always do—the joint effort of the district support team members and other involved individuals, combined with additional data collection and analysis, will make certain that any needed adjustments retain the focus and intent of the system's original goals and needs.

Working Systemically Spring Cluster Meetings
Regional ESCs will host Texas CC staff as well as the districts and schools that are participating in the Working Systemically professional development sessions. These 3-day sessions will include an update and debriefing session in which Texas CC staff and ESC staff will reflect on progress to date, an introduction to the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle, and a debriefing session and discussion of phase III (Planning Action). Cluster meeting dates are listed below:

- Region 10: March 31–April 2, 2008
- Region 11: March 31–April 2, 2008
- Region 7: April 8–10, 2008
- Region 19: April 9–11, 2008
- Region 20: May 7–9, 2008
- Region 1: May 12–14, 2008
- Region 13: May 12–14, 2008
- Region 4: May 20–22, 2008
- Region 6: May 20–22, 2008

April 15, 2008
The Texas CC will hold an all-day professional development session for ESC school improvement staff at the new SEDL headquarters at 4700 Mueller Boulevard in Austin.
Make no mistake, districts and schools that deliberately work to create coherence using the Working Systemically approach still work hard. In fact, initially, they might find themselves working harder than ever before. Their efforts are much more likely to pay off in terms of increased student achievement, however, because their goals and direction are clearly mapped out and collaboratively orchestrated, reducing discord and resistance as the work progresses.

References:

Creating Coherence in Osceola
Sally Bennett

Sally Bennett, EdS, is the assistant superintendent and director of instruction for the Osceola School District in Osceola, Arkansas. The Osceola School District served as a test site during SEDL’s initial 5-year contract with the U.S. Department of Education to develop and refine the Working Systemically approach. In this article, Ms. Bennett describes her district’s past and continuing efforts to create coherence.

The Osceola School District was one of those districts that could be described as an incoherent system. We were working diligently to overcome the designation by the state department of education as being in “school improvement.” It appeared there was not a program that the district had not purchased and attempted to implement—with varying degrees of success. Nothing was ever evaluated for effectiveness, and new initiatives were simply added to the melting pot of district efforts in hopes of finding the right combination. When SEDL approached the district to be a participant in a research study to test its approach for helping low-performing districts work more systemically, this was seen as one more concept to try. Maybe this would be the “fix.”

Soon after the Working Systemically approach was introduced to the district administration and building principals, the district’s perspective began to change. Not only did the district leaders begin to examine the many initiatives that had been introduced in the district, but they also began to look at how decisions were made that had impact at both the district and school levels on student achievement. The district began evaluating the fidelity of program implementation. Were the math and reading programs that were in place actually being implemented, and what was the actual level of the implementation?

The Working Systemically Training-of-Trainers cluster meetings continued throughout the fall of 2007. Several regional education service centers (ESCs) hosted the meetings for the districts and schools that are participating in the Working Systemically professional development sessions. On Day 1 of the cluster meetings, ESC staff had an opportunity to reflect with the Texas CC staff on their progress in phases I and II (Understanding the System and Analyzing the System). On Day 2, the district and school staff participated in a full day of data analysis and interpretation activities. The ESC staff learned about phase III (Planning Action) on Day 3. An additional round of cluster meetings is scheduled for the spring of 2008.

On December 4, 2007, the Texas CC hosted a session for all participating ESC staff to reflect as a community of practice on their progress to date with the Working Systemically approach. The ESC staff also received more in-depth information related to the purposes and processes for the steps in phase III (Planning Action). Texas CC staff provided ESC teams with information and ideas for developing, refining, and aligning improvement plans and afforded time for the teams to work together to plan the next steps.

Also in December, ESC Title I staff participated in an overview of “Working Systemically for Improving Student Achievement.” This session was presented by Texas CC staff at TEA’s NCLB Update session at the Texas School Improvement Conference. Participants learned about the need for a systemic approach to school support and increased their awareness of SEDL’s Working Systemically approach and of the competencies necessary for working systemically.

One of the first efforts for creating coherence was the formation of a district leadership team (DLT). The team comprised the superintendent and other key district staff, building principals, and teacher leaders. After some initial trepidation, the team was able to develop group norms in order to work together productively. The team members met monthly and began by reading and discussing research-based articles that explored differences between high-performing and low-performing...
districts and schools. They then worked to identify the root cause of the lack of student achievement.

First, the DLT identified a desired goal of “all students learning at high levels.” The district used the state guidelines for adequate yearly progress as an indicator that students are learning at high levels. That goal had not been clearly articulated before. The team developed an action plan to achieve that goal. Each school learned how to calculate exactly how many students had to be proficient or advanced on state assessments to reach that goal. Schools were then challenged to put actual student names to correspond to that number. That became the starting point. Part of the action plan involved identifying all the various programs and initiatives recently adopted at the district and school levels. At a DLT meeting, each of the program names was written on an arrow-shaped paper. The team members then placed the arrows at various angles to indicate the degree of alignment to the identified goal. It was quite a revelation to see that many of the efforts did not support the identified goal. This helped set the stage to identify where the district’s focus needed to be in order to impact student achievement more strategically. This in-depth evaluation ultimately resulted in the replacement of the math program, a focus on instruction, and assessment to state standards was the root cause for poor student performance throughout the district.

This identified focus has served as the foundation for the district’s continued efforts for improvement. In addition to the DLT, each building now has a campus leadership team (CLT). These teams are still working to build capacity by studying research-based strategies, analyzing student achievement data, and refining the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to standards. Most important, the district is working across the levels of the system and coordinating improvement initiatives. Staff development efforts now target identified student learning needs and are thereby promoting coherence throughout the district. School board members are also engaged in supporting the district’s efforts and representatives from the regional educational cooperative has frequently participated in DLT meetings in order to lend support.

Is the Osceola School District where it needs to be? Not yet. The district still has schools identified as being in school improvement. Are students achieving at higher levels? Yes. Students made 10% or greater gains in 11 out of 24 areas on state criterion-referenced assessments. Has day-to-day practice changed in the district? Definitely. Collaborative decision making is more the norm than it is has ever been. The goal is clearly identified, and the district remains focused on achieving that goal. Although the district’s partnership with SEDL ended in 2005, the Working Systemically approach continues to guide the district’s improvement efforts to create coherence across the system.
The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has created the NCLB Reauthorization Database. This resource allows you to search a variety of organizations to learn about their recommendations for reauthorization. The database is searchable by both organization and NCLB topic area (such as adequate yearly progress, teacher quality, and data systems and reporting). ECS will update and expand the database as new or revised information is released. The database can be accessed by visiting www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/NCLBreauthorization/NCLB_parapro_DB_intro.asp.

Growth Model
U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has announced that all eligible states are now able to submit proposals to implement the growth model to measure adequate yearly progress. Growth model proposals must adhere to the following seven core principles outlined by the U.S. Department of Education:

- Incorporation of sound goals to reach 100% proficiency by 2014
- Establishment of growth targets based on grade-level proficiency rather than student demographics or school characteristics
- Maintenance of separate accountability decisions about student achievement in reading/language arts and mathematics
- Inclusion of all students and subgroups and all schools and districts in the assessment and accountability system
- Inclusion of operational, approved, annual assessments that produce comparable results from grade to grade and year to year in each of grades 3–8 and high school in both reading/language arts and mathematics
- Capability to track student progress in a comprehensive state data system
- Inclusion of student participation rates, student achievement, and another academic indicator in determination of adequate yearly progress

For more information, go to www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/growthmodel/proficiency.html.
NCLB Update Information to Be Available as Podcast

One of the goals of the Texas CC is to provide TEA and the state system of support with access to resources designed to support their work in implementing NCLB requirements.

Beginning January 7, 2008, as part of this work, the Texas CC is providing podcasts of the state-level NCLB information provided weekly in the NCLB Update e-mail. New podcasts will be added each week after the NCLB Update is produced by the Division of NCLB Program Coordination. Podcasts are available approximately 24 hours after the NCLB Update is released by e-mail. Podcasts will be available at http://txcc.sedl.org/resources/podcast/. Subscribers will continue to receive the e-mail version of the NCLB Update, and it will continue to be archived at http://list.tetn.net/archives/nclb.html.