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SPOTLIGHT

Theories of Action: Aligning Priorities and Resources

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Theories of Action:

Aligning Priorities and Resources

A clearly articulated “theory of action” can help districts focus on producing great results through a more focused set of activities — especially necessary considering today’s challenges of tightening budgets and increasing accountability. When an additional dollar can be added or when one needs to be cut, district administrators must decide where the impact will be. Central office decisions and superintendent-directed change can be misinterpreted or misunderstood at the building or classroom level. Lewis Carroll’s famous quote from *Alice in Wonderland* is often quipped: “If you don’t know where you’re going, any path will take you there.” Like Alice conferring with the Cheshire Cat about a fork in the road, school district leaders must work to establish a common vision and a clear pathway that allows teachers, parents, and taxpayers to better understand the district’s decisions.

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This District Management Council (DMC) Spotlight explores the value of a theory of action for improving district leadership by establishing priorities and making good resource allocation decisions.

incremental to comprehensive — and in how they are written and communicated. Implicitly or explicitly, these theories of action shape the role and expectations of the district leadership, central office, school leaders, teachers, and staff.

What Is a Theory of Action?

If a theory of change is a set of beliefs about what motivates people and how an organization works, a theory of action is a guide to the action that will achieve the desired results. Richard Elmore, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, defines a theory of action as a set of interrelated causal statements that describe actions or strategies that improve instructional practice and student performance, over time, at scale.¹ In this definition, “at scale” means that the improvements will reach all students in all classrooms through the daily work of teachers and administrators.

Clearly articulating a theory of action in a school district is a proactive effort to guide and align the district’s policies, priorities, and budget. Theories of action create a clear pathway from the aspirational vision and mission to the instructional activities in any given classroom. Today, school district theories of action vary widely in scope and approach — from

Formulating a Theory of Action

A theory of action can take one of a number of different formats. Most common today is to articulate the theory of action as an “if ... then ...” statement that draws together various elements focusing on different aspects of the district. Multiple if-then statements are acceptable, and even encouraged, if they reinforce each other. A common theory of action might include an emphasis on providing the tools, techniques, and training to advance “effective teaching.” The same theory of action might then prioritize the use of standards and data to reflect and reinforce effective teaching. Finally, the theory of action would connect the focus on effective teaching and the use of standards and data to student achievement.

The theory of action should state what a district believes to be the root cause of improved student learning. These assumptions should form the basis of extensive group discussions by district leaders in framing what the theory of action should be. Is professional

development the key driver? Are “professional learning communities” a road to increased student learning? Will merit pay motivate teachers within a district? And *why* will a theory of action improve student learning? One easy way of identifying these first principles is by using the “Five Whys,” a technique that helps distill a problem by asking “why?” five times. The root cause of an issue is likely identified by the time the fourth or fifth “why?” is asked. For example, a problem might be identified as the lack of data used by teachers to inform instructional practice.

1. *Why?* Teachers do not actually have good data to use in a timely manner.
2. *Why?* The formative assessment data does not get turned around in a timely fashion.
3. *Why?* The central office struggles to get so much data crunched and turned around quickly.
4. *Why?* The scanning machines that process the formative assessments are constantly backlogged.
5. *Why?* The scanners do not function properly and are rarely operating at more than half of their rated capacity.

In this example, the root cause of the lack of data being used to inform instructional practice is actually a capacity constraint due to faulty hardware. The action steps that result from this analysis need to focus on assumptions of *what really matters*.

Creating and Using a Theory of Action

A theory of action, when written properly, is designed to provide the district with a testable hypothesis about how change will occur. The testable hypothesis also provides accountability for results. Over time, effective use of this information allows for improved decision making, resource allocation, and strategic abandonment of non-core or counterproductive activities. Further, a well-crafted theory of action becomes an agreement among stakeholders about what defines success in the district and what it takes to be successful. As such, it is a very simple and powerful communications tool.

DMC structures the formation of a theory of action into three basic steps (Figure 1). First, districts need to articulate what they believe. It may sound easy, but getting the core beliefs down on paper is no simple task. This step typically involves collaboration amongst many internal and external stakeholders through a set of facilitated discussions. Too often in elementary and secondary

FIGURE 1

Creating a District Theory of Action: Three Steps



education, the theory of action is left unstated or relies on overly optimistic assumptions. The accompanying Manager’s Toolkit (p. 44-45) is designed to assist district leaders in structuring these conversations.

Once core beliefs have been articulated, districts need to do a “gap analysis” between what the district is currently doing and what it should be doing in the future. This second step typically includes conducting a full, district-wide inventory of all of the activities and initiatives underway. Once the list is complete (and this can be a long list!), then a careful mapping can take place between the initiatives and the stated beliefs. Which efforts support the theory of action? Which ones are unrelated, or even conflicting? Are some key pieces missing? Districts will usually find that many initiatives do not fit in with the holistic district theory. In fact, some argue that the better the theory of action, the more of these unrelated initiatives will result, since the theory of action will be streamlined around the district’s core priorities.

The final stage focuses on how to close those gaps: how do we get from where we are today to where we need to be? Districts should map out an action plan to help transition from theory to activities to results. Further support materials are available from DMC on critical activities in this stage, including how to create a focus on real performance outcomes, how to set good goals, and how to manage a rigorous accountability structure.

Recognizing a Robust Theory of Action

How will you know that you have successfully followed the steps to create and use a theory of action? What, in other words, should a theory of action *not* be? First, it should not be used only as a communications tool. ▸

A theory of action should guide execution by being embedded in ongoing management practices, such as regular leadership team meetings. Second, a theory of action needs to provide a complete pathway toward the desired outcomes, and therefore should not be only a partial or incomplete approach. For example, district leaders who state that “professional learning communities” or “response to intervention” are their only theories of action might be missing something. These are a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves; a theory of action should include desired outcomes as well as the paths to get there. Such discrete topics are also likely to be incomplete when taken alone — they are part of a theory of action, but not a whole one. As Michael Fullan notes, if the causal pathway does not end in improved classroom practice, the system as a theory of action is flawed.²

Finally, districts should pay attention to the alignment of initiatives that may have their own theory of action, but which may not correspond well with the district’s overall theory. For example, programs and initiatives that originate from outside funders are appealing and often drive innovation. However, a hidden downside

sometimes exists — these initiatives can have their own theories of action that may or may not work together with the overarching district theory. A grant that funds a district-wide curriculum might not succeed in a district that emphasizes principal autonomy. The resulting mosaic of programs and initiatives could signal conflicting directions or competing priorities for district staff.

Common Theories of Action in Schools

Theories of action in public school districts come in many shapes and sizes. Some possible elements in a school district theory of action are listed on p. 42-43. DMC believes there is not one “right” theory of action for helping students, and that districts should develop their own theory of action based on their specific context and climate. For example, a theory of action might incorporate managed instruction — a belief that the district’s central office must directly control instruction in order to increase student achievement — or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, a theory of action might promote what is sometimes referred to as “empowerment” — a belief that the system should focus on results, with increased accountability

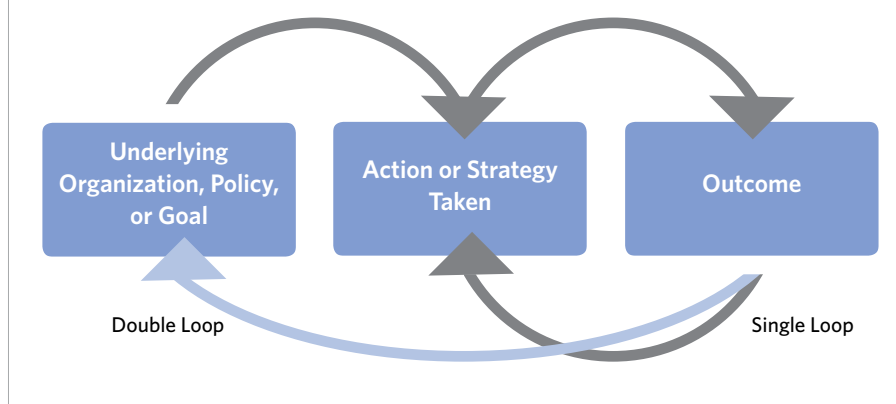
What is a theory of action?

A theory of action “describes the beliefs that undergird an organization’s strategy and links the strategy to the organization’s vision.”¹ They are often expressed as *if-then* statements that provide a road-map for actions to be taken to achieve an organization’s overall goals. They are explicit, and outline the concrete steps and interventions that will lead to change.

Theories of action have their root in Chris Argyris’ work on organizational learning and the individual’s relationship to the organization. Argyris argues that there are two different types of theories of action: an individual’s *espoused theory* (i.e., how a person says he/she will react in a certain situation) and that individual’s

FIGURE 1

Single and Double-loop Learning Cycles within an Organization’s Learning Process



Source: DMC analysis and summary of Argyris’ work.

and autonomy for independent decision-making throughout the organization. A district with a young staff or high turnover could favor managed instruction, while a district with veteran staff and significant student growth data could prefer the empowerment approach.

Many beliefs exist about what strategic path will lead to greater student outcomes, and no two districts are alike. Districts can also combine various approaches into one theory of action. For instance, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC), cites the following description in the introduction to its theory of action on the district website:

Management Performance/Empowerment is an approach to PreK-12 education that strikes a balance between centralized direction (Managed Instruction) and freedom for innovation in local implementation (Performance/Empowerment), with an emphasis on creating a culture of accountability throughout every level of the school district. It combines the effectiveness of a centrally managed academic program with the dynamics of a performance culture, while ensuring that freedom and flexibility (empowerment) is earned as a result of performance and improvement.

A Context Driven Approach

Are some theories of action better than others? Undoubtedly, some district theories of action have produced more positive results and evidence of success than others. However, to use the example above, neither empowerment nor managed instruction is necessarily better than the other, but one or the other could be more appropriate for the current context of the district. In a district where curriculum and instruction is a messy set of unrelated activities, managed instruction may be the most appropriate pursuit. Conversely, in a district where stakeholders are clamoring for differentiation by schools amidst a dysfunctional bureaucracy, some flavor of empowerment may be most appropriate. Charlotte-Mecklenburg combines the two elements to create its own unique theory. Each district should develop a theory of action that reflects its values, parent and community expectations, and history. Multiple components are typically needed to create a comprehensive theory of action that can guide a district's actions at both the district and school levels.

Simplicity is important, but so, too, is the connection employees can make to their own activities and ▸

theory-in-use (an implicit theory or mental map that guides how a person actually reacts).² Ideally, a person's *espoused theory* and *theory-in-use* would be aligned, but Argyris argues that this is often not the case. In fact, he claims, few people are aware of their own *theories-in-use*, even though a person's actions are more often guided by these theories than by his/her *espoused theories*.³ Effectiveness comes from the alignment of these two types of theories of actions, creating a match between intentions and outcomes.

The discrepancy between people's *espoused theories* and *theories-in-use* led to Argyris' and Donald Schon's work on single- and double-loop learning cycles within an organization's learning process (see Figure 1). Argyris defines organizational learning as "a process of detecting and correcting error."⁴ Single-loop learning is a process that enables the organization to "carry on its present policies or achieve its objectives" and to fix any resulting errors without questioning the root cause of those

errors. Double-loop learning is more comprehensive, and focuses on the underlying organization, policies, and goals that result in the error, rather than making surface fixes. Double-loop learning occurs when individuals or organizations try to align their *espoused theories* and their *theories-in-use*. Doing this is harder, but it can greatly improve organizational efficiency.

¹ Rachel E. Curtis and Elizabeth A. City, *Strategy in Action: How School Systems can Support Powerful Learning and Teaching*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009.

² Chris Argyris, "Double Loop Learning in Organizations," *Harvard Business Review*, 55(5), 115-125. See also: Mark K. Smith, "Chris Argyris: Theories of Action, Double-loop learning, and Organizational Learning," *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm Last update: September 7, 2009.

³ Chris Argyris, "Double Loop Learning in Organizations," *Harvard Business Review*, 55(5), 115-125.

⁴ Ibid.

Weight Loss Example: Theory of Action or Hope?

A theory of action is a set of beliefs, policies, and practices connected by logic rules. In short, it is why you think something will be successful.

Dieting provides a perfect example of the difference between a hope and a theory of action. “I will eat less and thus will lose weight” is not a theory of action; it is a hope. Leading weight loss companies, on the other hand, have developed a comprehensive theory of action:

1. Create a baseline (know your starting weight).
2. Set a goal (desired end weight).
3. Tightly control calorie intake.

Elements of a School District Theory of Action

The following is a categorized list with short explanations of elements commonly found in public education theories of action. This list is not comprehensive, and other elements may be appropriate for a district. Some districts employ these theories explicitly, while many districts employ a variety of these theories without explicitly naming them. A few of these elements have produced more positive results and evidence of success than others. What is best for a district, however, is often driven by values, context, and culture.

Staff-driven Elements:

1. **Principal autonomy:** By shifting resource allocation and decision making to the building level – where employees are most equipped to make decisions that benefit children – student achievement will increase.
2. **Earned autonomy:** By allowing principals to earn autonomy over certain domains when they are successful in their buildings, the district can continue to hold all building leaders to certain standards but reward successful practices. As a result, the district will focus attention where it is needed most, and student achievement will rise.
3. **Teacher quality:** By setting expectations for what is “effective teaching,” and providing frequent feedback to teachers through classroom observations and verbal feedback, teacher instructional practice will improve and student achievement will rise. The use of student achievement data may, or may not, factor into the teacher feedback.
4. **Performance compensation:** By providing incentives for strong performance, motivation for improvement will increase, stronger candidates will be attracted to working in education, and student achievement will increase.

Organizational and Cultural Elements:

5. **Professional Learning Communities:** Frequent collaboration amongst teachers in a grade or subject will improve instructional practice and student achievement will rise.
6. **Total Quality Management (e.g., Baldrige Award):** Through intensive measurement and monitoring of all district processes and operations, district functions will continuously improve and student achievement will increase.
7. **Systems thinking:** By combining multiple theories of change, all of which reinforce and logically connect to each other, all district decisions, practices, and resources will support a coherent set of beliefs that will raise student achievement.
8. **Policy governance:** By clearly defining the role of the superintendent as one of management, and the role of the board as one of policy, governance issues will be resolved and district functioning will improve, leading to increases in student achievement.
9. **Focus and alignment:** By creating a narrow set of priorities, a school / district will be better able to focus its resources (time and money) on creating progress and improvement, rather than on getting stalled by an ever-growing list of priorities, and achievement will increase.
10. **High expectations:** By increasing and standardizing expectations for students or staff, they will be pushed harder to achieve great things, creating a culture of high performance and increasing teacher effectiveness and/or student achievement.

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| 4. Set an exercise schedule (physical activity is required for success). | 5. Weekly weigh-in (for motivation and progress monitoring). | 6. Adjust as needed (mid-course corrections based on weekly weigh-in). | 7. Celebrate success (plan for end of services). | 8. Revise program based on success and failures of all participants (new program improvements each year). |
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Curriculum-based Elements:

11. **Standards-based and data-driven:** By setting clear standards, measuring progress through the use of common formative assessments, and frequently reviewing student achievement data, instructional practice will be improved, and student achievement will rise.
12. **Class of One:** By increasing the use of highly adaptive technology (such as internet-based learning) as the center of student learning, students can move at their own pace, quality of instruction can be standardized, differentiation can be maximized, resources can be conserved, and student achievement will rise.
13. **Managed instruction:** A district-wide curriculum, coupled with pacing guides and related professional development, will provide a seamless and aligned system of learning across the district, and lead to increases in student achievement.
14. **Whole child:** By engaging students in the visual and performing arts, physical education and athletics, and career and technical education, students will be more engaged in school, confidence will build, and student achievement will rise.

Structural Elements:

15. **Small schools:** By decreasing the size of schools, students and adults will develop deeper relationships, enabling staff to tailor services to student needs, heightening accountability for students, and leading to increases in student achievement.
16. **Small class size:** By providing smaller class sizes, classroom management will be easier, teachers will be better able to meet individual student needs, and student achievement will increase.
17. **Technology-rich:** By increasing the use of technology and connecting schools with the outside world through the Internet, student motivation will increase and students will more effectively gain 21st-century skills.
18. **Choice, charters, and competition:** Giving choice to students and families about which school they will attend will create transparency about school quality, schools will work harder to improve, unsuccessful schools will see declining enrollment while effective schools will increase enrollment and resources, and student achievement will rise.
19. **More time:** By providing more time on task in critical subject areas, either through extended school hours, a lengthened school year, or by borrowing time from less critical subjects, student learning will increase.

Community involvement:

20. **Parents as partners:** If parents have full visibility of their child's performance, and if they have the skill and will to do so, they will reinforce strengths and help address weaknesses, and student achievement will rise.
21. **Community engagement:** If the community is actively engaged with the school district, through volunteerism and community partnerships, the district will benefit from the influx of resources, and student achievement will rise.

how they relate to overall district success. An example from the private sector can help clarify how this works. Southwest Airlines has a very simple but effective theory of action: increase the amount of time that planes are in the air. Keeping planes in the air more leads to improved performance statistics and financial outcomes for Southwest, and most of its hallmark strategies drive this simple outcome measure. Why does Southwest not have seat assignments? Not having seat assignments decreases passenger boarding time, allowing planes to get in the air faster. Why does Southwest only fly 737s? Standardizing the type of aircraft simplifies all of the airline's processes, from routine maintenance to staffing, thus allowing planes to be in the air more. Southwest employees can test their own personal actions and initiatives: does what I'm doing right now help get or keep planes in the air? As a pioneer in the low-cost airline industry, Southwest's commitment to this theory of action has been a hallmark of the company's widespread success in delivering renowned levels of customer satisfaction and financial performance.

Unstated Theories of Action

Unlike Southwest, most districts do not have an explicit theory of action. Yet, DMC believes that a district's choices, especially with regard to resource allocation, serve as an implicit strategy despite the fact that they might not be clearly articulated. Due to the fiscal downturn, many recent discussions with DMC members have focused on the role of the budget in district strategic planning. Whether the budget really reflects strategic priorities is a challenging question for many superintendents. In the cases where a significant mismatch exists between the stated district strategy and where the money is actually flowing, the district may often be following an "unstated theory of action."

One example of this disconnect is what DMC calls the "small class size" theory of action. It appears that, based on what is protected in the budget, many districts tacitly follow a small class size theory of action. An explicit "if-then" statement about class size might be: "If we hold class sizes down, then individual attention between teachers and individual students will increase and student learning will improve." The theory would continue: "cutting professional development, reducing support for principals to be instructional leaders by having fewer assistant principals, and decreasing teachers' access to data by having fewer

staff members in IT and the accountability office will not harm student learning." Most districts do not have such explicit statements — the resource allocation is explicit, but the theory of action remains unstated. A second example can be described as the "protect the classroom" mantra that implies central office management does not really matter. As districts cut costs and thin management ranks, efforts are made to protect classroom teaching staff — perhaps without careful consideration of what the effect might be on curriculum leadership. The unstated theory of action revealed by resource allocation decisions may be in direct conflict with the district's stated theory of action. Both of these examples demonstrate the significant tradeoffs inherent in aligning district priorities and resource allocation decisions.

Conclusions

A good theory of action provides a coherent pathway to connect a district's aspirations to actual execution that will directly impact student performance. As a set of testable hypotheses, a district will be able to accept or reject these hypotheses over time, allowing for better use of the district's limited resources. The concept is also powerful from a political perspective, as it is an agreement among stakeholders about what defines success in the district and what it takes to succeed. A detailed theory of action can have a broad impact, and can fundamentally change the way a district works — from how people, money, and time are used, to significant shifts in accountability and operating culture — making this an exercise well worth investing in.

¹ Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiorman, and Lee Teitel, *Instructional Rounds in Education*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2010.

² Michael Fullan, "Change Theory: A Force for School Improvement," *Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper*, No. 157, 2006.



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