

CHAPTER 4

ASSESSING THE LOCAL SITUATION

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers who grasp the most important ideas from this chapter will be able to

- find the differences between aspirations and results at their schools;
- identify various sources of evidence for gaps between aspirations and results;
- understand and apply the concept of triangulation to create a more trustworthy rendering of evidence-based conclusions; and
- think more broadly about how to identify a learning problem, challenge, or gap.

Too often, we hear common laments in schools and school districts about decision making that follows a ready-fire-aim pattern or school improvement planning efforts that become highly ritualized. Both outcomes are based more on needing to meet arbitrary deadlines than on careful inquiry. Efforts to improve student performance take place in an atmosphere driven by local politics and a sense of urgency that borders on panic. After many years of ready-fire-aim in which waves of fads crash on the school district's shores with each new superintendent, teachers become demoralized and cynical (Schlechty, 2001). These unhappy results stem from a strong tendency to recommend and implement solutions to problems before the problems are fully understood. Consider the Algebra I problem discussed in Chapter 1. Commonly imposed solutions are to spread Algebra I over four semesters instead of two, offer variations of pre-algebra, or some combination of the two.

We challenge you to collect the data in any high school. You will likely discover a high rate of Ds and Fs no matter what the course sequence. Instructional problems cannot be solved until they are fully understood within the local context.

In this chapter, we focus on the challenge, learning gap, or instructional problem as the place to begin school improvement efforts. This is the moment in which you become a researcher, focused on collecting data in your own school site. It is not just about you, however. As a leader, you will need to help others understand the problem in similar ways. In many respects, this is the most challenging part of the school improvement process. The desire to impose and implement preconceived solutions is so strong among administrators, teachers, and parents that you are likely to find yourself under extreme pressure to skip the problem diagnosis portion of the school improvement process and jump to implementing a new program. But sustaining a systematic inquiry process is vital; when the problem is thoroughly understood, promising solutions will be much more evident and will have a higher probability of success. Further, you will clearly understand *why* the proposed solution is likely to have the impact you desire and how to sustain the effort over time.

A cautionary note before digging into the content of the chapter: Although we tend to believe that problems are seeking solutions, one of countless insights from James G. March (1994) is that it is often the case that solutions float around searching for problems. March and others developed an entire model about how this happens (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), but think about it intuitively. How often have you or someone you know walked into a meeting thinking, “I already know how to solve this problem. I just need to think about how to sell my idea to others.” Chances are good that you have been searching for a problem to link with this pet solution for some time. There are many preconceived solutions out there just waiting for problems to come along that they can solve. We implore you to resist this model by understanding that preconceived solutions are not likely to make the impact you desire. Unless or until the problem is well understood and agreed on by you and your collaborators, it would be pure coincidence that an “off-the-shelf” answer could begin to remedy the situation.

The end result of this chapter is a thorough understanding of how to identify a worthwhile instructional problem, challenge, or gap to address in an effort to engender school improvement. The next chapter helps you apply the concepts and strategies described in this one. Activity 4.1 is intended as a warm-up to thinking about the process of problem articulation by creating a retrospective on your school’s most recent improvement effort.

ACTIVITY 4.1 How Did We Do Last Year?

Change is a leader's friend, but it has a split personality: Its nonlinear messiness gets us into trouble. But the experience of this messiness is necessary in order to discover the hidden benefits—creative ideas and novel solutions are often generated when the status quo is disrupted.

—Fullan (2001, p. 107)

To understand today's problems more deeply, it is worthwhile to take stock of your school's improvement history. Take some time to reflect on your school's efforts to improve last year. Answer the following questions to stimulate your thinking:

- What were your improvement objectives last year?
- How well did your school do in meeting its objectives? How do you know? What evidence are you using to assess the impact of your school's improvement activities?
- What were the (un)expected problems or barriers that cropped up?
- What were some lessons you learned? Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?

An alternative means for reflection involves returning to Activity 2.2 and reconsidering your answers to the following questions:

- Last year, we tried to (insert your goal for improving student achievement) . . .
- by (insert your objective, or what you actually did) . . .
- because (insert the reason you thought this would help you reach your goal).
- What actually happened was (discuss the outcome in terms of your indicators of success) . . .
- because (say a little something about what you learned).

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND RESULTS

In Chapter 2, we briefly discussed the concepts of espoused theories (aspirations) and theories in use (actions). In this chapter, we explore ways to discover some of the espoused theories and theories in use active in any given school. The former concept is embodied in state standards that clearly, explicitly, and specifically lay out what all students should know and be able to do in the various

content areas over the range of grade levels. Presumably, you are well acquainted with your state's standards appropriate for your level of teaching and/or your subject area. We advocate exploring aspirations that are derived more locally, too. We also introduced some elements of change theory, which highlights the notion that the need for change is defined as a gap between the real and the ideal—where you are and where you want to be. Your job, initially, is to explore where such gaps exist and determine where you believe your school should invest its energy and resources to work to reduce this gap.

Schools and districts articulate local aspirations with one eye toward state standards and the other eye focused on local needs and interests. These more local espoused theories appear in part in statements of a school's vision or mission and core values. Related theories in use are more difficult to determine by looking at documents, but results or outcomes of teaching and learning efforts provide some evidence for the degree of alignment between theories in use and espoused theories. In the next two sections, we lead you through discovery of the differences between aspirations and results.

Aspirations for Our Students

Consider the following mission statement excerpted from an elementary school website identified somewhat randomly and disguised by a pseudonym:

The Rolling Hills community is **united** in fostering a **safe and nurturing environment** that challenges students to reach their **highest academic and personal potential**. Staff, students, parents, and volunteers **work together** to **promote and model intellectual curiosity, creative expression, acceptance, and respect for all people and cultures** as we continue our **growth as lifelong learners**.

Statements such as this one are suffused with aspirations and values. Although the two seem to overlap, statements that appear to be primarily aspirations are highlighted in light gray. These are the characteristics the school community members have determined they wish to foster in the organization and within the students they serve. In summary, the school aspires to be a safe place for all children, where they develop academically and personally into successful human beings. The values of unity, collaboration, growth, and lifelong learning are highlighted in dark gray. Additional values of academic excellence, interpersonal tolerance and respect, and personal responsibility are strongly implied in the aspirations.

The Rolling Hills Elementary School mission statement establishes a benchmark by which results can be assessed. This could take place on many different

levels—individual student, classroom, grade level, or schoolwide. Data can be collected that indicates whether or not the school is achieving the benchmarks it has established. We will say more about that in the “Data as Evidence of Results” subsection below.

ACTIVITY 4.2 Roundtable Discussion: Comparing the Ideal With the Real

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) remind us that all potential changes have a *real* and an *ideal*. The reason a real situation requires attention is that there is a gap between your real and ideal. The larger this gap, the greater the need for change. One way to begin to get a feel for your school's change priorities is to reflect:

1. Start by exploring the real—imagine that you were asked by a long-lost friend to explain what a day is like in your school. What would you say?
 - Describe the school climate or environment—how would you describe the general mood of the school?
 - Describe the kinds of activities that might typically be going on in classrooms—what are students doing?
 - Describe how the adults in the building go about their work—is there a lot of collaboration going on, for example?
2. Next, explore “where you want to be,” or your preferred future.
 - How would you like to see any of the above change to support a more powerful or effective school?
 - What are some important goals you would like to see your school pursue?

Share your thoughts with one or more critical friends. Consider the answer to this question as a way of communicating about your thinking: If you could change something about the teaching and learning process in your school that would significantly improve student learning, what would that be?

School improvement plans, the kind mandated by most U.S. school districts, are another valuable source of information regarding a school's aspirations. The plans are much more detailed and specific because school and administrator performance are often assessed against them. The plans tend to weave together the aspirations embedded in state standards and the school's mission or vision. The following excerpt from Franklin Middle School's (a pseudonym)

school improvement plan is an example of how the two sets of aspirations work together. This information appeared under the category “Evidences of Need”:

90% of all students passed the state reading test.

47% of LEP [limited-English-proficient] students passed the state reading test.

67% of economically disadvantaged students passed the state reading test.

60% of Special Education students passed the state reading test.

96% of white students passed the state reading test.

90% of Black students passed the state reading test.

71% of Hispanic students passed the state reading test.

86% of Asian students passed the state reading test.

Four important implications about aspirations are presented in this listing of state testing results: (a) Students are generally succeeding at a high level in reading, (b) an achievement gap between some student groups and the majority population exists, (c) there is still a good distance to travel to achieve the goal of all students succeeding at grade level, and (d) the school is committed to meeting state standards with the implication that all children can in fact meet them. We infer that the school aspires to improve at least some students' achievement in reading, because this list appeared under the heading of needs. Also noteworthy in the list is its shift from aspirations to results. The aspirations are implied, but the results are quite specific.

Discussion of school aspirations probably needs to go deeper than just remembering state standards and thinking about a vision or mission statement. It is important to know how those aspirations were developed, the degree to which they are widely known, and the extent to which faculty, students, and/or parents are committed to acting on them. In short, we need to know the degree to which aspirations are shared in the school's community. Thus, an important element of assessing the local situation is informal discussion about individual and collective aspirations with respect to student achievement.

The goals embedded in state standards and school missions are descriptions of what students are supposed to learn and how schools are intended to be. The gap between these ideals and what students actually learn and how schools really function defines the need to make change. Argyris (1999) points out that for change to occur, the ways in which organizations learn must change, because organizations are inherently defensive of the status quo. Questioning “how things are done around here,” as we advocate throughout this book, is your first step in changing how your school and community learn, and it is an

important part of moving the school improvement process out of the realm of pro forma activity or knee-jerk response to emergencies. Exploring the gap between the ideal and the real begins with data.

Data as Evidence of Results

As much as educators might chafe under accountability rules and expectations embedded in federal regulations and state testing regimes, reforms and innovations of the past 10 years have caused a great deal of student achievement data to be readily available. Furthermore, much of these data are easily accessed from school and district websites. As a point of optimism, the current emphasis on accountability and contemporary technology greatly eases the challenge of discovering state and local aspirations and results. It required fewer than 5 minutes for us to retrieve, copy, and paste references to overall goals and state testing data from two schools in different school districts for use in this chapter. Easily retrieved data found in school improvement plans is a productive place to begin.

In the example above, white and Black students have a high level of reading achievement based on statewide test results. The lowest-performing group is clearly the LEP students, followed by special education and economically disadvantaged students. The immediate question for any leader intending to focus on improving student achievement is “Which group(s) requires near-term intervention?”

ACTIVITY 4.3 Roundtable Discussion: Sources of Data

We make the distinction in this chapter between evidence and data, noting that data may be considered a subset of the kinds of information you might consult to understand the performance of your school. Take a few moments to discuss the following with one or more critical friends: What are the sources of data in your school that might inform your understanding of how well the school is meeting its learning objectives?

A caution about the ways in which we label students is appropriate here. Under the federal guidelines spelled out in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), categories of students (often referred to as “subgroups”) provide a focus for school improvement because of the need to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) for all groups and to report student data using these categories. An emphasis on data, however, can lead to treating students as data points rather than as children. For example, one common practice is to try to improve the performance

of those students whose scores were not far below passing on state-mandated tests. They quickly get labeled “bubble kids” because their scores are “on the bubble”—that achievement region in which the differences between passing and not passing are small. A focus on students who are nearly passing is a pragmatic approach to coping with scarce time and resources as the school strives to achieve AYP. The problem with this kind of thinking, however, is that it ignores the fact that students far from passing state tests are those who really need the most help and whose life chances are at the greatest risk. It seems unethical to provide less to the neediest within a group simply because they have the lowest probability of helping improve the school’s testing profile.

Understanding that not all students can be assisted to the same degree at the same time, we encourage manageable projects that address the needs of an entire subgroup. Moving beyond the numbers and school profile, it is easy to determine that if the program for LEP students at Franklin Middle School doesn’t change, then the majority of such students are at risk for failure and dropping out in high school. Looking a bit further into the school’s website, we discover that LEP students number 46 and make up approximately 5% of the school population. The small proportion of students who are not yet proficient in English may help explain their low achievement—their needs may be invisible to the school as a whole. Leaders find themselves in a difficult dilemma: be socially just by addressing the needs of a (potentially) marginalized minority or allocate resources to serve the greatest number of students? Special education and economically disadvantaged students are also struggling with reading but not in proportions as high as in the LEP group. Yet special education and economically disadvantaged students represent larger proportions of the student body—11% and 16%, respectively. Should we assist the group that has the lowest achievement level or the group(s) with the largest number? This is the kind of decision that cries out for collaborative discussion and decision making. The school community must make a deliberate decision about where to allocate resources, weighing the myriad criteria that create the complexity of this decision.

A Closer Look at Data

We have already been looking at two types of data—achievement test scores and demographics. In the latter case, we started to think about issues of importance (i.e., Is the LEP population large enough to be addressed through a school improvement project, or are there other factors such as improving the chances for later success that are more important than sheer size of the student subgroup?). Importance (note that we are avoiding the term *significance* because it has a specific statistical meaning we will discuss later in Chapter 8) is also a relevant concept for the test data. Is the 47% passing rate in reading for LEP students truly different from the 60% passing rate for special education students? There is a statistical process for

answering this type of question, but consider the numbers themselves. There are only 46 LEP students in the school, so a 47% pass rate means that about 22 LEP students ($0.47 \times 46 = 21.62$) passed the reading test. If the LEP students achieved the same passing rate as the special education students (60%), only about six more students would need to pass the test ($0.60 \times 46 = 27.60 - 21.62 = 5.98$). This basic arithmetic may suggest that the LEP group passing rate does not yield a substantially different outcome compared with the special education group. In a scenario such as this, local knowledge might indicate that some students are counted in both groups. It might be best for a school improvement project to take in both LEP and special education because their passing rate profiles are more similar than they appeared to be at first and some students are double-counted.

Whether or not designing a project to work with LEP and special education students together seems to be a good idea depends on the nature of the learning difficulties suggested by the test data and the reasons behind relatively low pass rates for the reading test. A deeper understanding of the nuances of why students are not meeting standards requires root-cause analysis—getting to the bottom of the problem. Until we know more about root causes (the subject of Chapter 6), it is impossible to think productively about a *strategy*, *action*, or *solution* to improve student achievement, because it is only when at least some of the root causes are removed that improvement will happen. At this point, the focus is on identifying areas most in need of improvement; the ultimate decision about whether to work with a larger number of students in an effort to use resources more efficiently may come later, as you develop a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem.

Worksheet 4.1 helps the emerging leader/researcher get started picking up data from today's most available sources, some of which may be in print form (e.g., common assessments within a grade level or subject area) and many of which are electronic. The reader will also benefit from thinking about different and complementary types of data that create a fuller picture of what is happening in a particular school. The most easily accessed data includes state testing results, district-required benchmark test results, student grades, and student demographics. A good strategy might be to look at and think about those data sources to begin to get an idea about the patterns of results related to the important aspirations of the school.

Other Assessments

Moving beyond the easily accessible test data—the “low-hanging fruit” of student achievement information—in the Franklin Middle School example, we ought to know how teachers view the performance of students who have not passed the standardized reading test. Presumably, language arts teachers and specialist teachers for both English as a second language and special education regularly test

students' reading abilities with assessments they have created themselves and/or districtwide benchmark tests. For each of the students who did not pass the state reading test, we would want to know if their profile is mirrored in teacher-made and/or districtwide tests. If the answer is yes, then we may conclude that curriculum and assessments are aligned. If the answer is no, then we would want to dig deeper into why students' achievement profiles differ depending on how they are tested. Both LEP students and special education students are likely to be taught and tested on material that contains different content compared with the majority student population because of the very nature of the learning challenges these students face. They are caught in a testing dilemma rooted in policy: Students may not be developmentally ready for tests at their grade level because of circumstances beyond their control (e.g., not having grown up speaking English; having a specific, measurable learning disability), yet they are required to be tested at their grade level anyway. Leaders must figure out ethical means to compromise around such dilemmas for the sake of their students.

Locally created assessments tell us more than just the degree of alignment with the state testing regime. Their more frequent occurrence and greater specificity allow for more detailed measurement of a learning problem, challenge, or gap. In organizational learning terms, classroom assessments provide finer-grain evidence for the difference between espoused theories and theories in use. As a result, they can be more useful tools for achieving the results to which the school aspires than state assessments alone.

Before leaving the topic, we wish to make our position on assessments clear and explicit. As we explained in Chapter 1, assessments are not the learning problem, though we often hear learning problems expressed in terms of whether or not a student passed a particular test. In much the same way that a cough or a snuffle isn't the flu, test results are only *symptoms* of a problem—these may be indicators of an underlying illness, but they are not the illness itself. A test score is an indicator of a potential problem. A problem may be lodged in the classroom, the school as a whole, the district, the student's attitude and belief system, the student's home situation, or some complicated combination of two or more of these. An effort to improve test scores without understanding the underlying causes of test failure will lead to ineffective and possibly unethical strategies to boost test scores. We believe that understanding the root causes of unsatisfactory test results is a prerequisite for creative and effective solutions. More than just assessment data is required in this effort.

Affective Data

Anyone who has ever taught and/or raised a child understands that motivation is an important factor affecting cognitive performance. There are many

influences on student motivation. Our experience suggests that one of the most important contributors to low motivation as students age is frustration with schoolwork. Many others are possible, such as hunger, instability at home, the need to work after school to support the family, or taking care of younger siblings while both parents work multiple jobs. On the positive side, relationships between teachers and students appear to have great potential to inspire students to do their best work. Assessment data will not tell us about student background factors and classroom rapport that impact the best instructional efforts and therefore cannot shed light on students' motivation.

Mandated school improvement processes often require school climate surveys, and schools often develop and implement other, more specific kinds of surveys (e.g., surveys dealing with parental satisfaction, school safety, or service learning activities). Depending on how the surveys are written, they may provide a window into the level of student engagement, parental involvement, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and broader community perceptions. The surveys themselves are likely to have been negotiated into not offending anyone, so the data they provide may paint only a broad-brush picture of whether or not students, parents, and the community are pleased with school outcomes. That is helpful information, but as with assessment data, alone it doesn't tell us enough about student motivation.

Thankfully, teachers have contact with students every day and know a great deal about how they appear in classrooms. Teachers will not necessarily know all the specific causes behind any particular student's level of motivation, but they might know some. They will certainly have a sense of personal factors affecting specific categories of students. For example, working evening and graveyard shifts is common for high school-age LEP students because, as immigrants, they often come from economically disadvantaged families that depend on them for income. Motivation may be low if LEP students are tired during the school day and cannot see the benefits from applying themselves in school. Special education students, on the other hand, have often experienced many years of academic disappointment by the time they reach high school, despite teachers' and counselors' best efforts to help them adapt their learning strategies to cope with their specific disabilities. Why would we expect such students to be highly motivated in the school setting that has been a largely negative experience for them? We do not intend to stereotype, and we recognize that not all LEP or special education students share the dampers on motivation described here. Yet what we describe is the experience of many and is worth noting and exploring.

The kind of evidence we have discussed in this section is generally referred to as qualitative data. As the term suggests, it helps illuminate qualities as opposed to quantities; it helps explain why and how things happen, not just what happens. Qualitative data is often overlooked by novice researchers, but

we encourage you to see quantitative and qualitative information as complementary in your quest to discover what is happening in your school.

Piecing the Puzzle Together

The multisource, somewhat complex process we describe for collecting data about the differences between aspirations and results provides the information that helps you identify the problem, challenge, or gap where you want to focus your school improvement efforts. That is the limited goal we have for this chapter—limited, but central to your efforts and the essential place to begin.

Why pursue so many data sources? There are two answers to this question. The first answer is that multiple data sources are critical to obtaining a clear picture about a school's current situation. Medical analogies come easily to mind. At the time of this writing, nations around the world are concerned about a strain of flu that appears to be spreading rapidly and may have serious medical implications for those who become sick. The fundamental question for any individual is "Will this flu kill me?" Medical researchers are not able to provide a definitive yes or no answer because it depends on multiple factors such as the individual's age, access to health care, other medical complications, and health and hygiene history. Likewise, with school improvement, the answer to a question such as "Should our school be focused on reading?" will depend on our interpretation of the data. Different data may support the same conclusion, or they may not.

Collecting information from different sources (e.g., state testing results, teacher-made tests, district benchmarks) and of different types (e.g., testing, student perceptions, teachers' classroom impressions) helps the researcher/leader understand trends with greater certainty. We call the process of using data from multiple sources triangulation (Maxwell, 2005). We can feel much more confident that reading is an important issue for LEP and special education students if the state testing data, teacher impressions of student performance, and student survey responses about their reading behaviors are pointing in a similar direction. Triangulation improves the trustworthiness of our ultimate conclusions and our confidence that what we think we are seeing is real.

This point is worth emphasizing; indeed, it is a theme of this book. It is incumbent on the leader to *triangulate* data to fully establish a *trustworthy* argument about the instructional problem. Any one data point might raise an eyebrow or get the attention of school leaders, but to have confidence in the notion that a problem truly exists and merits consideration, it is important to examine related data to gain confidence in this conclusion. Any one source of data has inherent limits, both in form and in terms of implementation. Thus, the leader as researcher might look at a number of standardized tests and/or teacher-made tests, look at data over time,

or both. Discussions with groups of teachers that reveal their craft knowledge and understanding of student needs based on daily interactions with them are important sources for triangulation. Triangulation produces a sense of trustworthiness, or confidence in this case, in the proposition that an instructional problem needs attention.

An important implication of our discussion of data collection and analysis is that data-informed decisions require substantial amounts of time before they can be made. The time required to gain a more complete understanding of the chosen learning challenge is a wise investment that will pay dividends in the action planning and implementation processes. Worksheet 4.2 provides a tool to help you determine the profile of data you need to collect and examine to analyze your school's performance.

IDENTIFYING A CHALLENGE, PROBLEM, OR GAP

After identifying some ways in which your school's results are out of alignment with stated aspirations, you will need to narrow your thinking down to a manageable school improvement area. It seems best to follow the advice we give to our doctoral students: Start with your passion. The project is something you will be working with for a long time. There will be moments of glory and periods of frustration. It is important that you have a deep commitment to the area you select so that your vision and goals will sustain you through some inevitably difficult times. But also consider what is important in the context of school and district priorities. As a practical matter, we urge our students to talk first with their principals about which areas they believe are most in need of attention. In the sections that follow, we present some areas worth considering, which may help guide the discussion you have with your principal.

ACTIVITY 4.4 Developing a Critical Eye

As you access various sources of data about your school, it is important to reflect on the general utility of the data and the quality of the source. For each table, chart, or graphic you amass, think about each of the following questions—or better still, discuss these with members of your collaborative team or a classmate.

1. What are these data? What are the data supposed to inform you about?
2. Based on an examination of these data (alone), what are you willing to say about student learning (or school climate or staff opinions)? What can you conclude? What questions do you have?

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3. How good are these data? Do you trust the source?
4. How useful are the data and for what?
5. Considering the presentation of data (e.g., chart, table, narrative), is this data communicated well? Why? What is accentuated, and what is hidden?

And one more—extremely important—question:

6. What more do you want to know? What other data—or other presentations of the same data—would you like to see?

Low Achievement That Persists Over Time

Many of the achievement problems schools face are not new. There are many suggested strategies for various challenging student populations, but results are often disappointing. NCLB has caused our attention to turn immediately to groups such as students with learning disabilities, second-language learners, and students from poverty. There is great value in studying the learning challenges of these student categories, of course, but they are not the only ways in which we might focus on students who have learning difficulties. Sometimes it is more important to explore a particular aspect of curriculum (as with the Algebra I example from Chapter 1), a particular grade level, or a grouping of students such as a “house” within a middle school.

It is not entirely clear why some learning challenges are so widespread and intractable. We suspect that deeply rooted achievement problems become part of the woodwork, part of how things happen under “normal” circumstances. Learning gaps such as poor reading comprehension or an inability to perform basic math operations do not have simple solutions once students reach high school, so schools and students cope as best they can. Many schools experience difficulty year after year with special education students who are unable to pass tests in reading and/or mathematics and second-language learners who progress through an English as a second language curriculum only to flounder when they have a schedule of all college preparatory classes.

Persistent problems that have not yielded easy or effective solutions in recent years provide fertile ground for a meaningful school improvement project. At the same time, working on them will not be easy, because they are deeply embedded in the status quo. Choosing to focus on a problem, challenge, or gap that has persisted over time means that teachers and their administrative teams

will need to examine teaching practices and how students progress through school to understand learning problems thoroughly. The investigation process may feel invasive of sacred ground.

Blind Spots

One of the frustrations we face in teaching our research class is when a student approaches us with something similar to the following statement: “My school is making AYP, and 90% of our students are passing the state-mandated tests. I can’t find a learning gap in my school.” Our reaction: You’re not looking hard enough. We have already made the case that there is more evidence regarding student achievement than state-mandated tests. Furthermore, we have yet to find a school in which all students are successful. In contrast to the fictional quotation above is the story of a student who worked in perhaps the highest-performing middle school in a very large system. He and his colleagues found that student achievement in mathematics dipped as students moved from sixth grade to seventh grade. This was not an issue of AYP or even state test failure. The challenge was to keep students on a high achievement pathway so that they would be maximally prepared for high school.

One of the most effective ways to see what others miss is to adopt a bias for inquiry, which can start with the question, “How can we do better?” Not only better in terms of obvious performance measures but also in terms of the journey that students travel in school. When the school experience has negative aspects, even some of the most capable students perform poorly. The importance of affective learning seems to be lost in the race for higher test scores, but it may be every bit as meaningful as our emphasis on cognitive development.

Importance

Finding an interesting gap to address is a good start, but working in this area may not seem important to others. Leaders using research effectively must be able to answer the “So what?” question. Why is it important to address the achievement problem for students whose families are in poverty? Some might argue that if the numbers of students in a particular subgroup are small enough, then it is not worth allocating scarce resources to their needs because it won’t “make a difference” in terms of the school’s overall achievement profile. We find such a position unethical on its face, yet we recognize budget constraints and the fact that choices must be made.

Demonstrating importance often requires making the case that addressing a specific issue will improve a particular group of students' life chances. U.S. education is generally predicated on a fundamental human capital argument: The more students learn, the more valuable they become in the labor market, thereby increasing their earning potential. This theory has been difficult to validate in specific, but it is generally true that high school dropouts earn less and have a harder time being employed than high school graduates, who in turn earn less than people who have earned a bachelor's degree. The implications for K–12 education are that we have a duty to help students increase their future earning potential by educating them well enough at one level so that they can progress to the next level. At the same time, the human capital argument states that a well-educated society supports a thriving economy that benefits everyone. If a school's improvement efforts help more children achieve proficiency in key academic subjects, then the prospects for the students as individuals and for society as a whole improve.

There are certainly many more bases for the importance of a particular focus than the human capital argument alone. Our point is that demonstrating importance, and therefore enhancing the persuasiveness of your arguments in support of a particular challenge or learning gap, requires a combination of suggesting a clear need (e.g., "If students who fail reading tests are not helped, then their probability of succeeding in higher levels of school is greatly diminished") and reaching a critical mass that will make a clear impact on school performance. This is a balancing act, because an improvement proposal that promises too much in terms of outcomes and reaches to a number of students beyond what available resources can support is doomed to failure and may engender substantial cynicism within the school. Remember, we are at the stage of identifying a gap to address. The scope of the ultimate project remains to be determined later.

CONCLUSION

Assessing your school's current situation is probably best approached as a mini research project to answer the questions "How well are we doing as a school?" and "How do we know?" What seems obvious in the beginning becomes more subtle and complex as you search for ways to explain how and why your school may not be living up to its aspirations in a particular area. Comparing locally available data to state standards and the school's mission is the first step to surfacing an aspect in which your school could and should improve. Examining additional quantitative and qualitative data begins the process of finding the root causes of a gap you have identified, something that you will return to often in the school improvement process.

Sometimes it is not clear that an issue we may have identified is really a problem, challenge, or gap worth pursuing. The box below helps you think about whether or not the focus area you have identified is worth pursuing.

DID I IDENTIFY A MEANINGFUL PROBLEM?

Three aspects to any issue will help you figure out whether or not you have identified a problem, challenge, or gap that merits your creation of a school improvement project:

1. *Progress*: Are the students on whom you have focused making academic progress? Are they progressing at a rate commensurate with peers in an appropriate comparison group? What does the trend look like over time? For example, a literacy program designed to help students who enter high school two or more grade levels behind in reading should be expected to help students progress at a rate faster than peers. If not, these students will not make it to the 10th-grade reading level required for the graduation exam in time to graduate with their class. If students cannot meet that goal, then the literacy program may be inadequate and in need of replacement.
2. *Perspective*: How are similar schools performing with respect to the instructional need and the focus group of students you have identified? If students in similar schools are performing better, then there is a case to be made that your school could be approaching this particular challenge more productively.
3. *Proficiency*: How does student performance compare with standards established at the district, state, and/or national levels? Scores may be getting better over time and your school may be outperforming similar schools on some measures, but if students are not meeting standards, then the consequences for their future education and career opportunities remain.

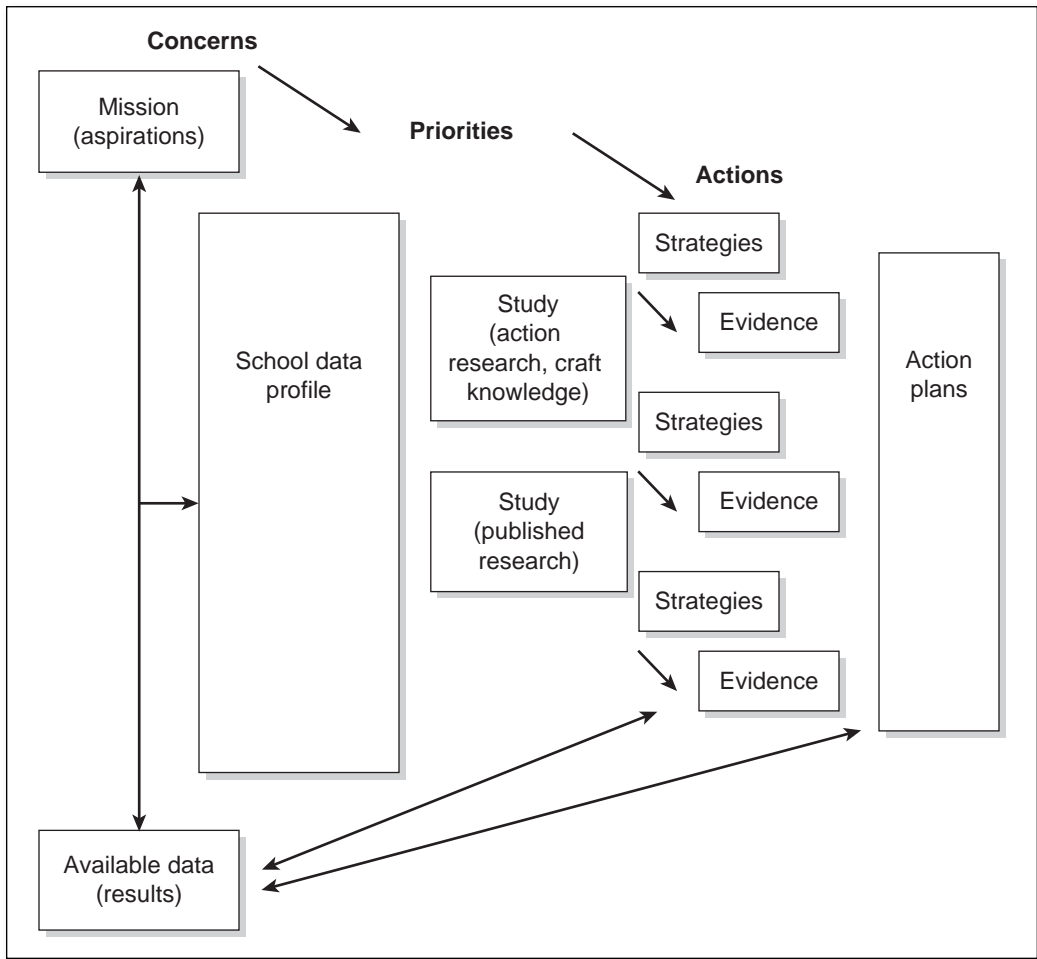
Answers to the questions posed by the three Ps above help you build a case for the existence of an instructional problem, challenge, or gap and its significance in specific terms based on criteria that are important to educators, students, and parents. These kinds of questions also serve as a guide to the kinds of evidence you may need to amass to be confident that the issue you identify is an important one.

Throughout this chapter we have been writing about conducting action research to begin your understanding of a local academic problem, challenge, or gap. Given the knowledge you have acquired about your local situation, it is time to choose your focus. Worksheet 4.3 is designed to help you do exactly that. If you are unable to complete the worksheet satisfactorily, you probably

need to go back and collect more data and/or engage in more discussion and thinking about ways in which your school is not meeting some of its aspirations.

In Chapter 5, we move to the process of persuading others that the instructional problem, challenge, or gap you have identified is a worthwhile place to focus attention, energy, and resources. Before moving on, however, consider the map of the school improvement planning process we provide in Figure 4.1. Thus far, we have addressed the left one-third of the figure. You are in the

Figure 4.1 A Map of School Improvement Planning



Source: Adapted from Holcomb (2004).

process of identifying concerns and figuring out which sources of evidence will help you make your case about a target improvement area.

In the next chapter, you will make your case by continuing the process of data collection started in Worksheets 4.1 and 4.2, engaging in some rudimentary data analysis (covered in much more detail in Chapters 7 and 8), creating data displays, and learning how to make persuasive arguments about the nature of the problem you wish to address. In short, Chapter 5 is the bridge between abstract thinking about problem articulation and the practice of communicating to the leadership team and others the nature of the problem you have found.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are important sources that will convey the aspirations and results in your school?
2. Name valuable sources of data other than state-mandated test results.
3. What is your improvement focus? How do you know it is important?
4. What are multiple data sources that would help you triangulate information regarding your problem, challenge, or gap?

WORKSHEET 4.1 Finding Data

As you begin your search for data that will help you identify an instructional problem, challenge, or gap in your school, it is a good idea to think about how to organize the data in your mind so you can develop a coherent picture. Begin with your school's aspirations. From your school's website (or a more appropriate source), read the vision or mission statement, and then record the following information:

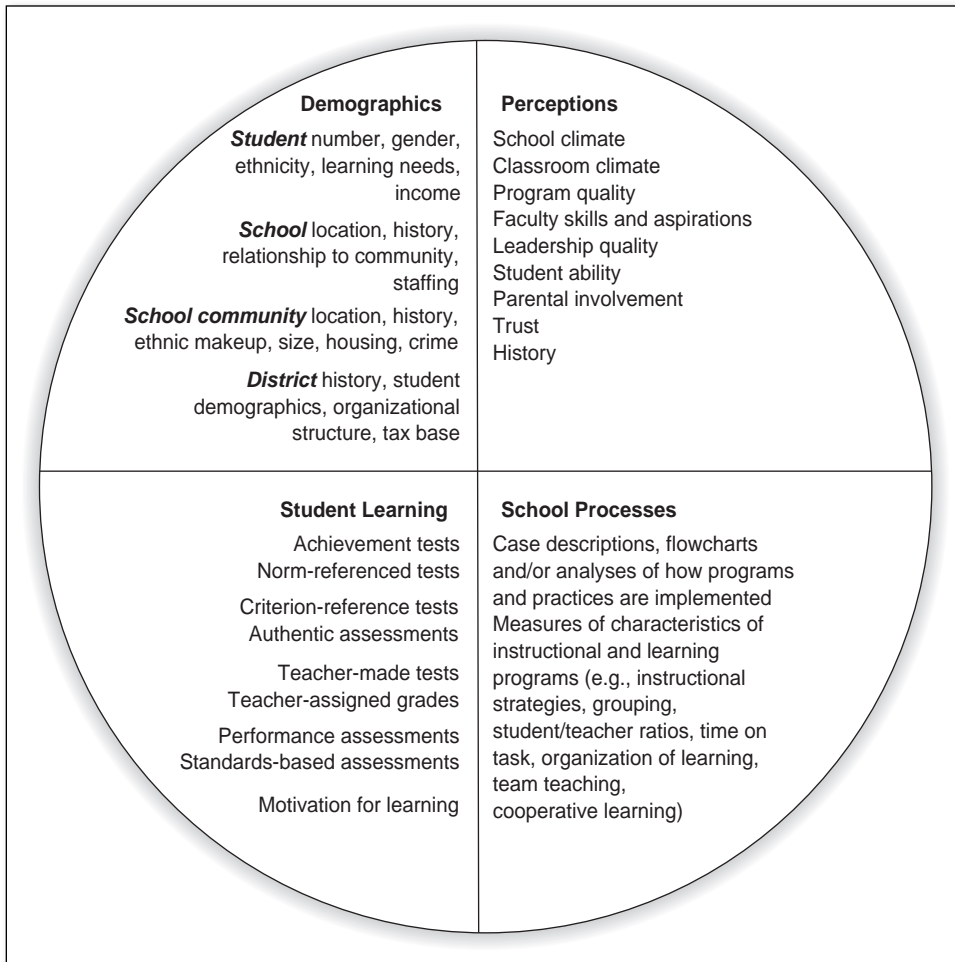
1. What are your school's aspirations for all students?
2. What are the values expressed in the vision or mission that would be considered central to the school's purpose? (If there is a specific list of core values, use that.)

The above information may give you a helpful baseline for what your school intends to accomplish educationally with all students. Sometimes, however, vision or mission statements are not up to date and/or are so general that they are of limited help. Examine aspirations embodied in state curriculum standards and school district goals. What aspirations and values are embedded in those sources? Establishing a starting point is important work that should not be avoided.

Assuming you can articulate your school's espoused theory of learning, search school, district, and state websites; review printed sources; and engage in discussions with teachers for information related to these aspirations that can begin to answer the question "How are we doing right now?" Use the diagram to assist your thinking.

Questions to consider:

1. What is your school's performance at present?
2. How has your school evolved over time?
3. Did you find conflicting or contradictory data?
4. How do different school factors interact to create a particular outcome?



Source: Adapted from Bernhardt (1998).

WORKSHEET 4.2 Your School's Data Profile

What do you need, and where can you find it? Use this worksheet to create a data-mining plan that will help you develop a clearer and more persuasive picture of your school's current situation.

Data Type	Data Source/Location/Collection Strategy
Standardized test scores	<p>Where will I find this data?</p> <p>Who will help me access this data if help is required?</p> <p>Who is stronger than I with data analysis? Can I enlist this person's help?</p>
District assessments	<p>Is this data reported back to school sites? Who has it, and who can help me get it?</p> <p>Is the data reported in a manner parallel to the state testing regime? If not, how is it reported?</p> <p>How accessible is disaggregated data that reports the progress of subgroups?</p>
Teacher-made tests	<p>Can I persuade teachers to share students' scores on these, at least in some areas? Would it be sensible to start with teacher-made test data from members of my collaborative team?</p>

Data Type	Data Source/Location/Collection Strategy
	<p>Is there a scheme I can use to create student profiles using different test results?</p> <p>Do teachers use common assessments? Can I get access to the results?</p>
Demographic and affective data	<p>Can I get access to information about which students are in various subgroups? Who can/will help me with this?</p> <p>Has my school conducted a climate survey recently? Who carried it out, and who has the results?</p> <p>Can I find time to interview teachers about their perceptions of the students I have targeted for my improvement project?</p> <p>Is it possible for me to conduct classroom observations, even if only for brief periods of time?</p> <p>Is it possible for me to interview selected students to gather their perceptions of school?</p>

WORKSHEET 4.3 Finding a Focus

Your explorations of data available from your school site, district, and state have likely stimulated your thinking about what is happening in your school site with respect to student achievement. We encourage you to put this information together with your own local knowledge about your school as you determine the appropriate place to focus your school improvement project. As best you can, follow these steps:

1. Write your district vision or mission statement here:

2. Write your school vision or mission statement here:

3. Add any core values, goals, or objectives you believe are important indicators of school aspirations for students:

4. Fill in the quadrants of the diagram below. As you look for trends in the information you have collected so far, see what matches your own passion for instructional improvement.

5. Write a brief statement that explains your focus for school improvement.

