Creating the “Target”

Taken from Jim Knight’s *Unmistakable Impact*

Almost every school in the United States has a school improvement plan. Such plans usually focus on literacy and mathematics goals and include detailed explanations of new practices to be implemented, with objectives to be met, timelines, data, and other information. A great deal of time is spent drafting these plans, often involving multiple staff meetings, and the documents themselves can become quite lengthy statements (sometimes longer than 70 pages) about how schools should improve. Unfortunately, too often, school improvement plans do not make an impact on instruction. As Bill Sommers has said, the plan can become an addition to the wall of binders decorating the principal's office. '

There at least two reasons why school improvement plans may fail to accomplish their intended purpose to be catalysts for dramatic improvements. First, **if a plan is long, few will fully understand all of the information it contains, and many may not even read it.** The human brain generally does not find it easy to understand and use large amounts of information—especially if the information is written in somewhat abstract language. Michael Fullan (2010b) puts this concisely: "Fat plans don't move” (p. 24).

Second, **if the plan is too complex, it is also hard for people to understand it fully.** The person or people responsible for the program may understand the plan, but there is insufficient knowledge across a school for the coordinated kind of professional learning necessary for unmistakable impact. This means that there are multiple interpretations of the plan, with different teachers implementing it differently, and different administrators and other leaders supporting implementation differently. *Thus, the focused collaboration that is essential never occurs.*

Finally, school improvement plans often do not address the nuts and bolts of instruction. A plan might include powerful literacy or mathematics programs for improvement, but if those programs are not implemented by teachers using effective teaching practices, they probably won't help students. No program will work until children are engaged. Educational change leaders need to give at least as much attention to instruction as they do to literacy or mathematics programs if they Want to see significant improvements and achieve excellent instruction for every student, in every classroom, every day.

At the heart of the improvement plan in an Impact School is *the Target*, a simple, one-page document that clearly states the school’s goals for instructional improvement. The Target can include student learning or behavioral goals or some other form of goal, but what matters is that the document is simple, clear, easily understood, and doable. Further, the Target should be written in such a way that it can be completely understood without any additional explanation.

Writing a one-page Target forces everyone involved to be extremely clear. There is no room for fluff when you only have one page, and there are no extra pages to hide a lack of clarity. This approach to improvement has been utilized by Kent Greens, chief knowledge office for SAIC, a high-tech research and engineering firm:

*We get people focused through one-page tools . . . If you can actually get everything on one page —and not just editing stuff out—that means the tool and the process caused you to reflect on what it is you want to do. If you limit the number of pages people have to explain themselves,* ***it forces them to reflect first and think about what they're trying to do. That's very important.*** *(Jensen, 2000, pp. 52-53)*

