DRIVEN BY LEARNING:
HOW THE FORCING FUNCTION PUSHES SCHOOLS TOWARD EXCELLENCE

Accelerate Institute®
www.accelerateinstitute.org
In *Hyper Focus: How to Transform Schools* we asserted that we can increase the number of quality schools available to all children, regardless of their background, by reshaping the way we think about the systems we have in place. We contended that there isn’t one policy, program, or practice that will transform every school in every state and that broad-based efforts have been unsuccessful because the school context and dysfunction were not accounted for during planning. However, schools cannot reshape dysfunction without a systematic approach to undoing it. As Charles Payne points out, “Replication of ineffective practices leads to compounded poor results.” Because of the tremendous complexities within schools, transforming them takes a strategic, systematic approach that includes Hyper Focus and a cycle of continuous improvement. Within the cycle of continuous improvement, effective goals and data-driven processes are key drivers of progress.

**DO YOU HAVE HYPER FOCUS?**

1. Are your visions of success and Big Rocks linked to the objectives of the Accelerate Framework? Are they clear to all stakeholders?

2. What is your school’s common goal, and is it tied to getting all students on-track to college- and career-readiness? Do you have a metric that tells you on a frequent basis whether your school is on-track toward the goal?

3. Does your school have an environment of trust, candor and transparency?

4. Have you set up a cycle for continuous improvement that includes these elements?
   a. A comprehensive school assessment and data review
   b. The creation of a school strategic plan with an 80/20 focus, goals, and action steps
   c. Data monitoring and course correction
SCHOOLS AND THE GOAL MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Eradication of a disease. Winning a gold medal. Earning a college degree. All of these outcomes first hinged on setting a goal; a result to be achieved. Equally important, however, is the constant monitoring of progress to that goal, with adjustments made along the way. To illustrate, we can look at the example of sports teams. Their goal is very clear-cut: to win a championship. As their wins and losses shift throughout a season, the leadership routinely evaluates what they need to do to increase their number of wins. That might be a change in the game plan, a shift in player matchups or pairings, or additional practices.

“To make reliable progress, a manager must be able to measure performance results against the goal.”

In their efforts to ensure that all students are on-track toward college- and career-readiness, we would anticipate that schools would be experts in setting and accomplishing goals. That’s not what we typically see, though. Most schools are not setting a big goal and looking at their data with enough frequency to implement change when it needs to happen. And they also aren’t accustomed to taking immediate action when the data does show that current practices are not working. So, even if schools are leveraging the 80/20 to identify their highest priorities during the strategic planning process, without an effective goal management process linked to the elements of the Accelerate Framework, they are unlikely to truly achieve school transformation.

There are a variety of different ways that organizations can approach the goal management process. One prominent method, used by companies ranging from Google to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is called “Objectives and Key Results” (OKRs).[^3] In this method, organizations set big goals (Objectives) and pair them with a set of measurable checks on progress (Key Results). The Objectives outline what an organization wants to accomplish, and the underlying Key Results, detail how members of the organization will accomplish them. A color-coding system is used as a quick check on the completion of Key Results and supervisor check-ins serve as a support in gauging whether changes need to be made.

OKRs push organizational leadership to identify what’s truly important while also asking team members to reach higher. “An effective goal management system—an OKR system—links goals to a team’s broader mission. It respects targets and deadlines while adapting to circumstances. It promotes feedback and celebrates wins, large and small. Most important, it expands our limits. It moves us to strive for what might seem beyond our reach.”[^3] The system also fosters transparency and teamwork, since everyone has ownership over and accountability to whether the organization is meeting the goals. Although members’ roles and work might differ, they are all working toward a common goal.

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Inspired by the OKR system, we at Accelerate Institute partner with schools to leverage the Forcing Function concept to create a system for goal management in schools. Our Forcing Function system includes a main school goal around student achievement, a Primary Metric to monitor progress toward the goal, and a set of structures and norms that “force” the school to analyze what is and isn’t working and create action steps. Each of the components of the system is crucial to the successful implementation of the Forcing Function.

This system pushes schools toward transformation as it weaves through each of the Accelerate Framework objectives: change management, high-performing team, constructive environment, aspirational environment, data-driven culture, and black-belt teaching. Execution of all drivers within each objective connects back to the main school goal and is monitored through the data and accountability to action steps and the school’s strategic plan.

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THE MAIN COMPONENTS OF THE FORCING FUNCTION SYSTEM
THE FORCING FUNCTION SYSTEM

The Forcing Function system is outcomes-based and forces school teams to confront the truth about what is actually happening in classrooms. If the school is not on track to meeting the main goal, the system functions to force a change, or course correction, to get back on track. **Team accountability is not based on what teachers have taught, but on what the data is saying that students have learned.**

FISHBOWL MANAGEMENT:

*Does your data lead you toward truth and transparency?*

When Alan Mulally became the CEO of Ford in 2006, he was charged with turning around a company that had just posted $12.7 billion in losses. He noticed a lack of cohesion, including regional offices that had different products and sales plans. So, he started with setting a clear goal that was communicated internally and externally. To track progress toward the goal, he instituted “business plan reviews” in order to begin “reinforcing the plan with a laser focus.” But in his initial status meetings with executives, he was hearing only positive reports, even though the financial reports did not reflect that same positive outlook. Finally, one division head opened up about internal problems and stated that his numbers were not positive, and things were not going well. Mulally stood up and clapped. “The data sets you free,” he said.6

The culture at the organization needed to shift toward truth and transparency in order to reach its goals. An effective Forcing Function system pushes organizations to confront the facts and focus attention on action planning to achieve improved results.

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SHIFTING FROM THINKING TO KNOWING

Monitoring progress toward a goal requires teams to move beyond hunches and instinct; they must interpret what the data is telling them. The probing question then shifts from “What do we think?” to “What do we know?” and gets to the heart of team accountability based on what students have learned, not just what teachers have taught.

“Data is one of the most powerful tools to inform, engage, and create opportunities for students along their education journey—and it’s much more than test scores. Data helps us make connections that lead to insights and improvements.”

Because of the education sector’s assertion that data analysis is necessary for school improvement, it is now the norm for schools to state that they are “data-driven.” We would therefore expect all schools to yield the same high results or high improvement. But we don’t see that. For a variety of reasons, many schools don’t effectively collect, analyze, and act on their data.

Schools often run into several roadblocks:

- They don’t have the right data, either because they can’t access it, they aren’t sure how to discern which data they should be looking at in a given situation; or, their internal assessments are not aligned to standards and are giving an inaccurate picture of student performance.
- They don’t know how to analyze the data, due to team members with weak analytical skills or due to “analysis paralysis,” where analyzers are either overwhelmed by the number of data points or stuck in the analysis phase.
- They don’t know what to do with the data and are uncertain about the right action steps to take.

SHifting FROM THINKIng TO KNOWing CONTINUED

It turns out that one of the distinguishing factors between schools that improve and schools that don’t is the smart use of data to drive school change. As Catalyst Schools CEO Gordon Hannon points out, “I see some schools who say, ‘we collect a lot of data.’ But they aren’t exactly sure what to do with it. It didn’t really inform instruction; they didn’t have a methodical approach to it or understand what it meant for instruction—and what it meant for proficiency and mastery.”

Additionally, though individual teachers may be looking at their student-level data on a frequent basis to inform their lesson planning, many school leaders only look at their data a few times per year. That is not nearly enough to be able to make real change for kids throughout the year. Without regular, “zoomed out” analysis of classroom-level data, it is impossible to pinpoint trends, whether they be trends across content areas, grade levels, or teachers. Schoolwide data analysis should be frequent enough that immediate change can take place, and it should be done at a level where there are no surprises as to whether end-of-year assessments will show that students are meeting college- and career-ready standards.
EFFECTIVELY DATA-DRIVEN

Within the Forcing Function system, the *Primary Metric* is the data point that should predict whether students are on-track to meet the end-of-year school academic goal. Therefore, it is critical that the data be based on a standards-aligned unit or module assessment at grade-level rigor. Leaders and leadership team members should be using the *Primary Metric* data—along with attendance, discipline, and classroom walkthrough data—as a monthly check on progress toward the end-of-year school goal. Teachers should be using the *Primary Metric* data monthly to drive instruction, pairing it with aligned weekly and daily student data.

### PRIMARY METRIC TRACKING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Students at Proficiency</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schoolwide Average</strong></td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten A</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten B</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Grade A</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Grade B</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Grade A</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Grade B</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Grade A</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Grade B</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade A</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade B</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example of color-coded tracking of the Primary Metric.** The school set a goal of 75% of students at proficiency in each classroom. The Primary Metric shifts the school’s focus away from the average schoolwide proficiency rate and toward the percentage of students who are proficient in each classroom. This allows for classroom-by-classroom monitoring of progress toward the larger, end-of-year state assessment goal.
In the Accelerate Institute process, the Primary Metric is reviewed during a “win the month growth meeting.” In these monthly meetings, school leadership teams come together to discuss the color-coded classroom-level data and its relationship to student attendance, discipline, and classroom walkthrough data. All meeting participants are required to review the data ahead of the meeting. From there, the team completes the ACE process: Analyze, Create options, Execute and monitor progress. During the “analyze” portion, the first question the team answers is whether the school “won the month.” In other words, are classrooms meeting their monthly target? Team members bring in additional data points connected to student culture and teacher coaching to identify root causes behind the results. Next, the team “creates options” by brainstorming the high leverage, strategic plan aligned action steps that can be implemented during the next month to respond to the data. Lastly, during the “execute and monitor progress” portion of the meeting, the team confirms the action steps that are being committed to and defines how progress will be measured.

For example, in the Primary Metric snapshot shown on the left, there are 6 classrooms color-coded blue because they did not meet the October proficiency goal. Per the Forcing Function system, this data “forces” the school to take action. As a result, the leadership team moves into figuring out how to make a course correction in order to increase the number of classrooms meeting the proficiency goal. First the team would analyze the patterns in the data:

- Which classrooms and grade levels did meet the goal and why? Can their strategies be leveraged in other classrooms?
- Which classrooms and grade levels improved month-to-month and why? Can their strategies be leveraged in other classrooms?
- Which classrooms and grade levels are not meeting the goal and why?

Additional data should be incorporated into the conversation to help explain the patterns. For example, perhaps all of the green classrooms also had the best student attendance rates, and walkthrough data showed each teacher had met the instructional delivery criteria.
Next the team would shift to strategic brainstorming of possible action steps, recognizing that setting high expectations for teachers and students should directly result in an increase of support for both groups. Action step options should address the root cause of falling short of the goal and should align to the school’s strategic plan and Big Rocks. They should also relate to building staff capacity, including whole school, grade-level, or departmental professional development or individual teacher coaching. A schoolwide challenge, where the majority of classrooms are missing the target, might result in a schoolwide professional development plan. A specific grade-level or department challenge might result in a planning meeting for that particular team, while an individual classroom challenge might result in coaching for that teacher. Additional actions might include steps on communication, accountability, or changes to current student support systems. Finally, with the leader guiding the team in prioritizing key strategies, the team would select the execution action steps. The team would also identify the owner of each step, determine the timeline and how staff time will be allocated, and detail how to measure progress and outcomes.
WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE FOR A SCHOOL TO BE EFFECTIVELY DATA-DRIVEN?

An example from Katie Kirley, executive director and principal at Steel City Academy in Indiana (K-12 school that is 95% minority and 75% low-income)

The leadership team sets an end-of-year academic goal for student proficiency rates on the state assessment and school performance on the state accountability rating system. They also set a Primary Metric that will show whether they are on-track to meeting the goal and they establish systems and metrics for student attendance, discipline, and classroom walkthrough data.

Students are grouped into “squads” and know the attendance, discipline, and academic targets for their squad. Teachers and staff also know the targets.

Each month, the leadership team synthesizes data on student attendance, discipline, and content mastery along with classroom walkthrough data to check school progress toward the goal. Squads meeting their monthly targets are celebrated schoolwide. For squads not meeting their targets, the leadership team and grade-level teacher groups create course correction plans leveraging the 3-5 most important teaching “look fors” that should be emphasized to increase student achievement.

Over the next 30 days, the leadership team and grade-level teacher groups execute the course correction plans. “Look for” data is collected and analyzed in conjunction with the culture and academic data in preparation for the next monthly data meeting.

HOW CAN NETWORKS, DISTRICTS, AND BOARD MEMBERS SUPPORT SCHOOLS TO BE EFFECTIVELY DATA-DRIVEN?

An example from Gordon Hannon, CEO of Catalyst Charter Schools in Chicago (2 schools with a total student population that is 99% minority and 94% low-income)

Principals and leadership team members use school- and classroom-level data to identify their priority levers for increasing student achievement. These levers could be related to an instructional program, teacher evaluations or coaching, or student culture.

Levers are entered into a dashboard and shared with the CEO, the Board, and teachers in order to focus and align all stakeholders to the priority goals.

The CEO and Board allocate resources accordingly so that schools have what they need to meet their priority goals.

The CEO, Board, principal, and leadership team monitor the data in the dashboard and look for correlations between the levers that were selected and the movement in student achievement. Adjustments are made if the data is not showing improvement.
A school’s actions are a direct reflection of how it lives out its values. When one leader arrived at a school he was tapped to turn around, he found that through its systems, it had “not only made visible the expectation that most students would not achieve, but also enforced that expectation very efficiently. That is, he found a school that had reserved advanced work for only a few students and had much lower-level instruction for the rest.”

Conversely, if the adults in the school are to be held accountable to getting students on a trajectory toward college- and career-readiness, then the systems that are created and implemented should reflect that. A focus on assessments, analysis, and culture are necessary components for school success, but unless they are paired with real, concrete action, they will not yield results. To actually drive meaningful change, a school’s analysis of the data must lead to action steps that will improve instructional practice, going beyond a surface level or what appears to be easiest. Most importantly, teams must hold themselves accountable not only to whether the action steps were completed, but also to whether they made the intended impact on student learning.

High-performing schools implement action steps that get at root cause, improve teacher practice, and drive school change. On the next page, there are several specific examples of what that has looked like in different schools when they zoom out to the classroom-by-classroom level.

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10 Examples are from schools with which we have partnered to provide leadership coaching.
In examining the monthly reading assessment results, the leadership team was concerned that the K-2 classes were not growing, and fewer and fewer students were meeting the benchmark goal for their grade. After looking at additional student achievement data, as well as observation and feedback action steps, they hypothesized that teachers were not internalizing or understanding how to teach the network-required new curriculum. They planned three Professional Developments (PDs) for the K-2 teachers around the new curriculum, providing modeling and strategies for each section. Additionally, after each PD they did a walkthrough of all K-2 classrooms to observe the reading instruction, scoring each teacher on a walkthrough form that included action steps from the PD. At the end of the process, they had 100% of teachers meeting the PD action steps and were able to move on to new strategies.

When looking at the schoolwide monthly unit assessment data, the leadership team noticed that a 4th grade math teacher and 3rd grade reading teacher each had much lower proficiency rates than their peers teaching the same content. In analyzing root cause, they realized that one teacher was a first-year teacher, and the other was new to the school and curriculum. They developed a plan for the ELA coach to model teach the first period each day for the 3rd grade teacher. Then, in addition to co-planning together, the coach would watch the teacher lead one lesson and give feedback. They took the same type of approach with the 4th grade math teacher. As a result, unit assessment scores rose each month and after three months were on par with the other classes’ scores.

Despite high school algebra teachers receiving weekly coaching, benchmark scores showed that algebra was the only subject significantly behind the school’s goal. As a first step, the leadership team changed the schedule so that coaches could be in one full algebra class per day to real-time coach the teachers. This resulted in slight improvements on the next benchmark, but students were still far behind. The leadership team then decided to change the master schedule. During what had been a free study period and office hours for teachers, they added a forty-minute algebra block for all 9th graders, taught by leadership team members and science teachers using a plan that the math coach created based on that days’ lesson. By the next benchmark, there was significant growth in the algebra scores.
DRIVING SYSTEMATIC CHANGE

Within the education sector, individual schools are the unit of transformation, with principals acting as the catalyst for change by creating the conditions that are necessary for excellent teaching and learning to happen. Through Hyper Focus, which includes setting a clear vision of success and leading an adult culture of trust and transparency, principals can reduce the dysfunction that exists in many schools.\(^{11}\) If this dysfunction is not remedied, schools have virtually no chance of improving student achievement.\(^{12}\)

With Hyper Focus in place, the schools that are most successful in accelerating student learning are those that fully leverage effective systems in order to improve. “These schools not only put in systems but also continually evaluate them so that they can continue and expand the ones that work or change or jettison those that don’t.”\(^{10}\) The Forcing Function system pushes schools to continuously confront the data on student learning and holds them accountable to whether their practices and programs are truly driving improvement.

Systematic change, though, must not end at the school level because individual schools exist as part of larger networks and systems that are often dysfunctional themselves. When, for example, states hold schools accountable to one set of curricular standards and assessments, but districts hold them accountable to another, schools are forced to set priorities based on conflicting expectations. This misalignment is also confusing to parents and stakeholders, who are left with no clear picture of how schools are actually doing. It is therefore imperative that Hyper Focus and an effective continuous improvement cycle be executed across all levels of the education sector—from the school level, to the district and CMO level, to the state level, and even to the federal level. Ideally, there should be objectives and key results at each level, all aligned to the overarching goal: that every student in America will graduate college- and career-ready. With that clear goal at the forefront, we can ask:

**How can we measure progress to goals to ensure continuous improvement in our schools for all students? What actions do we need to take at each level to get us there?**


EVERYONE WORKING TOGETHER TO DRIVE SYSTEMATIC CHANGE.

School transformation is not easy work, nor is it uncomplicated. It takes a lot of things working together at peak performance and alignment: a belief that all students can be college- and career-ready, goals that reflect that, and systems and practices that push team members toward collaboration and action. It is a continuous process and our nation’s students cannot afford for us not to get it right.