HYPER FOCUS:
HOW TO TRANSFORM SCHOOLS
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WORKING TOWARD QUALITY SCHOOLS FOR ALL CHILDREN
We know that it’s possible.
SCHOOLS AND SYSTEMATIC CHANGE

The measure of our education system’s success is whether every child, regardless of their background, has an equal opportunity to thrive as a global citizen. This is true in a significant number of schools across the country, but it is not true of all schools. Performance has been inconsistent; too many schools are falling short of the goal of being inclusive places that support every child in maximizing their potential. And even schools that look successful on the outside are able to hide their mediocrity behind the advantages that their students bring to the classroom. The truly effective schools are those that have adopted SYSTEMS\(^1\) that set themselves up to be healthy, safe environments that are culturally relevant and centered on student learning outcomes.\(^2\)

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1 https://accelerateinstitute.org/programs/ryan-award
SCHOOLS AND SYSTEMATIC CHANGE, CONTINUED

Through decades of school reform, we have cycled through policy after policy, program on top of program, hoping to find the one thing that will improve education across the board. But there isn’t one. There isn’t one policy, program, or practice that will transform every school in every state. Schools are complex,3 and transforming them takes a strategic, systematic approach to a continuous cycle of improvement, with one fundamental belief: that ALL students are capable, growing learners.

Past broad-based efforts to improve schools have been unsuccessful not because there weren’t good policies and programs to choose from, but because individual school context and dysfunction were not accounted for during implementation. In lower-performing schools, an adult culture of distrust, low expectations, social tension, and weak communication impedes any efforts to execute high-level change.4 To achieve widespread improvement in education, individual schools must be the unit of transformation. The principal, then, functions as the major agent of change and catalyst for creating and sustaining the conditions necessary to make schools effective learning environments for both students and teachers.5

Since schools are not traditionally set up for systematic change, they haven’t tended to produce transformational leaders. As researcher Richard Elmore pointed out in his discussion of the relationship between leaders and their organizations,

“One does not get to lead in education without being well socialized to the norms, values, predispositions, and routines of the organization one is leading. So relying on leaders to solve the problem of systematic reform in schools is, to put it bluntly, asking people to do something they don’t know how to do and have had no occasion to learn in the course of their careers.”6

In other words, principals are the key to improving schools with the most challenges, but they must disrupt the traditional way that schools are organized.

3 Payne, C. So Much Reform, So Little Change. (April 2008)
4 Ibid.
5 Allensworth, E. & Hart, H. “How Do Principals Influence Student Achievement?” (March 2018)
LEADERS ARE THE CATALYST FOR SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

School leaders impact student achievement by creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning to flourish. From evaluating and developing teachers, to managing resource allocation and engaging with the community, principals play a pivotal role in school effectiveness: initiating and implementing reforms, and creating the culture where those can take place.7 And when it comes to actually improving student learning, principals are second only to classroom instruction.8 At Accelerate Institute, we believe that leaders are the catalyst for school transformation, and as such, we coach principals in a change-management approach to continuous school improvement.

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8 Wallace Foundation, “A Briefing on Strengthening the School Leadership Pipeline and Connections to Federal Policy,” (May 2018)
Our work begins by partnering with the school leader, their network or district manager, and the school leadership team to establish a productive culture within the school. In order to reverse any dysfunction present among adults, we teach strategies to build trust, candor, transparency, and productive communication. Once teams understand what healthy interactions look like, the foundation is in place for them to work toward a common goal. To truly drive change, schools need a metric, or "FORCING FUNCTION," that will force the leader to monitor progress and confront what is or isn’t working. The schools with which we partner examine classroom-level student achievement data each month. That data is the basis for any actions that the leader takes, creating short intervals of course corrections.

With the Forcing Function at the forefront, we advise leaders as they create systems that reinforce the healthy adult culture that’s been established. This starts with the ACCELERATE FRAMEWORK, which is the synthesis of our work identifying the key processes and practices that high-performing, high-poverty and high-minority schools9 have in common. The Accelerate Framework is divided into six main objectives for school success: change management, high-performing team, constructive environment, aspirational environment, data-driven culture, and black-belt teaching. Each objective also contains a number of key "drivers" that help schools determine whether they are effectively meeting each objective. Drivers build on each other in complexity and higher-order strategies. Initial drivers, which focus on setting values and expectations, must be implemented effectively in order to gain traction on later drivers, such as behavioral interventions and staff accountability. The Framework guides school leaders as they assess their school’s strengths, areas of growth, and opportunities.

9 Over several years, we examined both the research base and our own observations of high-performing, high-poverty and high-minority schools. We then developed our Accelerate Framework based on the key systematic commonalities between these schools.

Accelerate Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drivers</th>
<th>Change Management</th>
<th>High-Performing Team</th>
<th>Constructive Environment</th>
<th>Aspirational Environment</th>
<th>Data-Driven Culture</th>
<th>Black-Belt Teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Strategic planning is used to guide change management with an 80/20 focus</td>
<td>The team is committed to the vision, strategies, and tactics to accomplish the goals</td>
<td>A highly-constructive learning environment exists that supports academic productivity</td>
<td>A highly-aspirational learning environment exists that honors student experience while inspiring future accomplishments</td>
<td>Assessment data is used to drive differentiation</td>
<td>Teachers effectively plan and implement the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>• The main goal for the school and the plan to accomplish the goal has been clearly articulated. • The entire staff is bought into the mission and vision for the school. • Progress towards goals is monitored to determine effectiveness of strategies. • Course correction occurs as necessary to ensure that the most effective plan and strategies are implemented. • Staff time is appropriately focused on the annual goals and the key strategies, while managing urgent matters effectively.</td>
<td>• Staff expectations and non-negotiables are clear. • Staff is bought into the vision of the school and is free of blockers or resisters. • A hiring process is conducted with clear alignment to staff expectations and non-negotiables, and the school is staffed to meet the needs of the students.</td>
<td>• Expectations and behavior management systems that support high levels of academic productivity are clear. • The entire staff is bought into the behavior management system used to holding students accountable. • All classrooms have established an environment that is conducive to learning. • Staff members are held accountable to upholding the behavior management system and hold students accountable. • The behavior management system works for most students. • Interventions are available for students who do not respond to school behavior management system.</td>
<td>• Vision, values and goals for students are clear and inspiring. • Students want to come to school because they feel known and cared for. • Students are recognized for their growth and achievement. • Social emotional learning curriculum helps students develop self-regulation, positive relationship building and decision-making skills. • Exposure to college, career, and enrichment experiences outside of the school community inspires student investment in learning. • Families are valued for their contributions and offered opportunities to engage in the school community.</td>
<td>• Purpose and expectations of schoolwide data processes are clear. • Staff is bought into using data to differentiate instruction. • Valid and reliable assessments that match Common Core/College Readiness Standards for all grades and content have been adopted. • Timely, leader- and teacher-owned processes are conducted to assess, analyze, and act on data at the school-wide and individual student level. • Teachers are held accountable to analyzing and using data.</td>
<td>• Curriculum includes a vertical scope and sequence aligned to standards and guides teacher planning. • Teacher and student schedules maximize student learning and teacher development. • Whole group instruction is engaging, rigorous, and aligned to standards. • Students receive individualized or small group instruction based on assessment outcomes. • Data trends from assessments, observations, and walkthroughs are used to support teacher effectiveness through whole school professional development. • Staff receive frequent coaching and valuable feedback on their teaching performance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 3       | • Course correction occurs as necessary to ensure that the most effective plan and strategies are implemented. | • Performance levels are communicated directly and promptly to all staff. • Staff is consistently held accountable to job expectations. | • Teacher and student professional development is aligned to standards and guides teacher planning. | • Teacher and student professional development is aligned to standards and guides teacher planning. |
| 4       | • Onboarding and development of staff is systematic, fosters buy-in and trust, and results in high levels of teacher retention. | Teachers are celebrated for their accomplishments and progress toward school goals. | • Timely, leader- and teacher-owned processes are conducted to assess, analyze, and act on data at the school-wide and individual student level. | • Teachers are held accountable to analyzing and using data. |
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The Accelerate Framework outlines the overarching system that needs to be in place for a school to be successful. Our comprehensive assessment process uses the Framework to anchor a cycle of continuous improvement, pushing schools to continuously refine their practices. By assessing each school’s performance in implementing the Accelerate Framework objectives and drivers, schools are evaluated and supported based on where they are. The ultimate goal is for schools to reach proficiency in all of the drivers within each of the six objectives, as is the case in truly high-performing schools.

**THE CYCLE WORKS AS FOLLOWS:**

1. **School Assessment and Data Review**
   - The Accelerate Framework is used to conduct a rubric-based comprehensive school assessment, identifying the school’s strengths, areas of growth, and opportunities.
   - Student- and teacher-level data are analyzed.

2. **Creation of Semester-long Strategic Plan**
   - “BIG ROCK” priorities are selected using the 80/20 rule, which include a set of key results, milestones, and action steps to measure progress.
   - A target is set for the monthly primary metric (the “FORCING FUNCTION”).

3. **Implementation of Strategic Plan**, with monitoring and course correction based on the data.

4. **School Assessment and Data Review**, with a root cause examination for any priorities not met.
SETTING SEMESTER PRIORITIES BY USING THE 80/20 RULE

Originating from Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, the 80/20 RULE (also referred to as the Pareto principle) asserts that, for a given event, 80% of the outcomes come from 20% of the causes. Pareto was originally describing wealth distribution in his country, observing that 20% of the population owned 80% of the land. Since then, however, shrewd organizations have taken the premise behind the 80/20 rule and used it to maximize their productivity and impact.12

Schools can use the 80/20 rule to focus on the 20% of strategies that will yield 80% of results. That’s not to say that there aren’t other important actions that schools could or should be completing. But school leaders who make everything a priority will end up losing sight of what’s important, thus getting bogged down in day-to-day, tactical actions. With limited time and resources, and so much work to be done, the 80/20 rule pushes leaders to create semester-long strategic plans that are focused only on their top priorities, or "BIG ROCKS."13

13 Covey, S. “Big Rocks.” https://resources.frankincovey.com/the-8th-habit/bigrocks
During the summer, once the comprehensive school assessment is complete, leaders analyze the results in conjunction with their corresponding student-level data. A total of three “BIG ROCKS” are selected based on where the school is at in terms of implementing the key drivers within each Framework objective. Then leaders create a semester plan that details the rationale and vision statement for each “big rock,” including key results and milestones, and hone in on which actions key staff will undertake to achieve the priorities. The goal of the semester plan is to push toward mastery of the systems that have been selected by focusing on the right strategies. At the end of the first semester, the process starts again, guided by the school assessment and data review. This time, leaders may keep the same “big rocks” but go deeper into the drivers and into more complex elements of the system implementation, or they may choose new “big rocks” if the previous ones have been mastered.

In prior years of our work with school leaders, they were creating year-long strategic plans where they selected “big rocks” and set corresponding key results for each of the six Framework objectives. Not only were leaders losing clarity due to so many priorities, but they were also having difficulty communicating them to their leadership team and effectively monitoring competing key results. In essence, they were losing the 80/20 focus and not prioritizing any of the objectives. By reducing the duration of the strategic plans from year-long to semester-long, as well as reducing the number of “big rocks” from six to three, leaders must choose what is most important. Even though work continues throughout the school year in implementing all of the systems outlined in the Framework, schools have a laser-like focus on the objectives that are most critical for success that year.
Tying the "**BIG ROCK**" selection to the comprehensive school assessment ensures that schools are creating strategic plans that are grounded in data and based on where they are. Although no two schools have the same strategic plan, there are some top-level trends in terms of the objectives that are selected for focus. Startup schools and schools in their first year of change tend to focus on building a high-performing team and developing a positive school culture (called Constructive Environment and Aspirational Environment on the Accelerate Framework). Schools that are in their second year of change and beyond move into work on improving instruction and refining their data-driven culture.

Finally, in creating their semester plans, school leaders must take care to detail a clear vision for each "**big rock.**" There is now increasing evidence that in many schools, processes and practices are exacerbating racial achievement gaps. Cultural biases are impacting which students get disciplined and how, and impacting which students are tracked into lower-level courses and held to lower expectations. School leaders must be mindful of this and ensure that their vision directly connects staff expectations to student outcomes. The Accelerate Framework and strategic planning process support leaders to set a high bar for all students and address any staff biases that might impede the school from meeting its priorities.

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14 Lewis, A. & Diamond, J. "Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools." (September 2015)
HOW DOES THIS WORK IN PRACTICE?

SCHOOL A
High School, 47% African-American, 51% Latino, and 78% low-income.

Year 1 of Implementation of Accelerate Model – Semester 1
Context: At this first-year start-up school, it was necessary to establish systems around student and adult culture.

**Big Rock 1:** Establish a constructive learning environment through behavior management systems, accountable student expectations, and behavior interventions for students that is upheld and supported by all staff. (Framework Objective = Constructive Environment)

Under this “big rock,” the school is working to articulate a vision for what a constructive learning environment looks like. Staff was charged with collaborating to create measurable student behavior expectations. Teachers were to consistently review behavior expectations with students.

The school set the following key results: 100% of staff members will consistently implement, uphold, and support student behavior expectations in and out of the classrooms; 100% of staff members will consistently monitor and support the implementation of behavior interventions set in place.

Year 1 – Semester 2

Once the school articulated the expectations for the behavioral system in Semester 1 and implemented the system, it could transition to monitoring the quality of the system and the impact on students. As a result, the school set a focus for Semester 2 that monitors the results of the behavior management system, building on the basic structures established in Semester 1.

**Big Rock 1:** Identify and create a system to collect and analyze behavior management data for teachers and students. (Framework Objective = Constructive Environment)

Under this “big rock,” the school plans to develop a data process for the schoolwide behavior management system that includes progress monitoring and course correcting implementation in order to improve supports for students. This system will include monthly incentives for students and a progressive discipline plan to ensure the school is being responsive to the needs of all students. Staff will be on-boarded on the new system at the beginning of the school year. The school leadership team will input behavior data weekly and will monitor trends monthly, course correcting as necessary.

The school set the following key results: 100% of staff are following through on the Schoolwide Routines and Progressive Discipline Plan on a daily basis; 100% of behavior data is input weekly, analyzed, and responded to; 100% of teachers must contribute 100 “Caught using RISE” and 100 “Spirit” points each; <10% of students receive more than 10 infractions per week.
SCHOOL B
K-8 School, 99% Latino and 94% low-income.

Year 2 of Implementation of Accelerate Model – Semester 2

Context: With strong systems already in place for the Change-Management and High-Performing Team objectives, this school has the capacity to focus on the higher-level drivers within the Black-Belt Teaching objective.

**Big Rock 1:** Intensive coaching model is implemented and monitored weekly. (Framework Objective = Black-Belt Teaching)

Under this “big rock,” the school is focusing on aligning what priority coaching means, consistent monitoring of whether coaching is working, and providing professional development to coaches.

The school set the following key results: 100% of priority teachers are parallel coached, receive differentiated Wednesday professional development, and are monitored weekly for progress at one-on-one meetings.

Year 3 – Semester 1

Because teacher coaching is a more complex, higher-order driver within the Black-Belt Teaching objective, this school will continue to dive deeper into this process during Year 3 – Semester 1. Having already completed implementation of the coaching model, the focus shifts to quality.

**Big Rock 1:** Coaching, professional development, and walkthroughs are aligned and result in teacher and student growth. (Framework Objective = Black-Belt Teaching)

Under this “big rock,” the school is attempting to address survey data that found mixed results in the usefulness of teacher instructional supports. This semester, the school is focusing on ensuring that coaching improves teaching, and as a result, improves student outcomes.

The school set the following key results: 80% of teachers implement next steps from PD as measured by the walkthrough rubric; 100% of intensively coached teachers improve monthly, student-level outcome data.
WORKING TOWARD QUALITY SCHOOLS FOR ALL CHILDREN

Every school can leverage the Accelerate model to find its individual entry points to continuous improvement, and ultimately, school transformation. For schools aiming to catch up students that come in behind, it is crucial that they get the right systems in place, with a constant eye on student-level data to ensure that adjustments are made as early as possible. By using a strategic framework outlining what success looks like, and creating goals and data-driven processes, we’ll continually increase the number of quality schools available to all children, regardless of their background.

We know that it’s possible.