

## BEGINNING A TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE PROCESS

### Baseline Assessment of Organizational Capacity

*Srik Gopalakrishnan*

From school districts to companies to government bodies, organizations are constantly striving to increase their organizational capacity to achieve the desired results. Before engaging in any thoughtful process of change and growth, organizations need to assess their current capacity and establish a baseline. Such a baseline assessment of organizational capacity informs planning and helps track progress over time.

The Ball Foundation is currently designing and implementing a baseline assessment with its newest partners, Allentown (PA) School District and Rowland (CA) Unified School District. The first year in these five-year-long partnerships is an inquiry and engagement phase that results in a partnership agreement between the foundation and each district. A key facet of this phase is the design and implementation of a baseline assessment of the districts' organizational capacity. The baseline assessment will inform partnership planning as well as lay out a reference point so that the progress of the partnerships can be monitored over time.

#### **Ball Approach to Baseline Assessment**

The Ball Approach is an intentionally adaptive, whole-systems approach that includes a set of processes, disciplines, tools and protocols that build organizational capacity and enhance organizational learning. This repertoire was derived from a range of fields such as organizational development, learning organizations, living systems theory, and adult learning. The foundation believes these are applicable in every phase of its work, starting with baseline assessment.

Given this approach, the Ball Foundation believes that conducting a baseline assessment is more than just a data-collection exercise. It is part of the overall change process and an inten-

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# BASELINE ASSESSMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

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tional means of capacity-building. The foundation has designed the baseline assessment based on the following principles:

- The baseline assessment should build on an asset-based approach using processes of appreciative inquiry.
- The baseline assessment should be interactive, participatory and stakeholder-focused.
- The baseline assessment should use a combination of an “inside-out” and an “outside-in” approach.

## Implementation of Baseline Assessment

The first step in the baseline assessment process is to identify the *areas of inquiry* that are most critical to the school district (see diagram on p. 3). These are the broad set of questions for which answers are being sought through the baseline assessment. Next the partners (the school district and the Ball Foundation) determine a set of co-defined *indicators* related to the broader areas of inquiry taken from two essential perspectives:

- *Inside out*--An inquiry into what assets are at play in schools, classrooms and the district that enable exceptional experiences and high levels of performance

- *Outside in*--A set of customized characteristics of effective schools based on research, theory, best practice and experience of Ball staff, consultants and partners

Once the indicators are determined, the assessment is designed and implemented. The assessment may employ a variety of data collection methods, both quantitative and qualitative. A systematic, inquiry-based analysis of the data helps reveal the organizational capacity of the school district and informs the creation of the partnership agreement and work plan.

## Outcomes of the Baseline Assessment

The primary purpose of the baseline assessment is to establish an organizational capacity baseline that can inform partnership planning. Key decisions around resources, priorities and action steps will be determined by the partners based on what is revealed in the baseline assessment. However, other equally critical outcomes for the partners include:

- Enhanced capacity around thinking evaluatively (asking questions, using data, openness to new information) about their work

### The Ball Foundation

The Ball Foundation is a 30-year-old non-profit operating foundation that conducts programs in two areas, Career Vision and Education Initiatives. The foundation also undertakes research to ensure the continuous improvement of its programs and practices. The foundation's mission is to help individuals recognize and develop their potential.

### Board Members

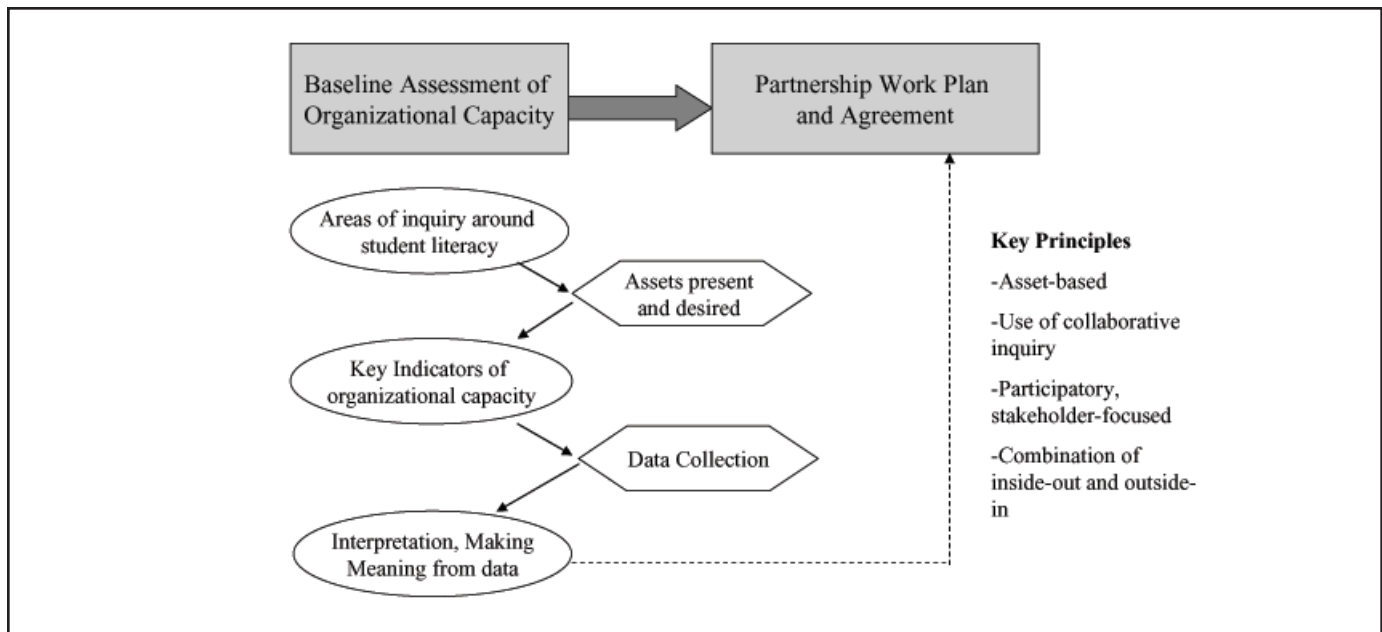
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- A culture of collaborative inquiry and valuing processes of dialogue and reflection

Although this initiative is only a few months old, the Ball Foundation is starting to see evidence of these outcomes. Leaders in the partner school districts are already examining ways to apply lessons learned to other parts of their work—notably their strategic plans and school improvement processes. Others are starting to use processes of collaborative inquiry in their work with adults and students. The Ball Foundation and the school districts will continue to build on these outcomes as they look forward to the next few years of productive and successful partnerships. ■

The Ball Foundation believes that conducting a baseline assessment is more than just a data-collection exercise. It is part of the overall change process and an intentional means of capacity-building.

*A diagram of the baseline assessment process*



# STORIES FROM

## We'll Leave the Light on for You

Maureen Grey

What do leaders do to light the path for others? What thinking, mindset, ponderings, or scenarios must they toy around with in order to help pave the way for others? In many American public school systems today the answer is critical. Michael Fullan, noted educational researcher, talks about leadership and sustainability and urges systems to connect vertically, horizontally and internally. He calls this process, "connecting the system to itself."

Connie Petter, a learning consultant for Northview Public Schools, shines a light on

Effective schools use data, rather than intuition to make informed, collaborative instructional decisions while welcoming everyone's participation.

lessons learned about literacy, use of data to drive instructional decision making, and leadership. She regards the district administrative leadership as reflective and highly trained as a learning organization. This has spilled over to the teaching staff. Numerous literacy leadership opportunities are available to teachers. The K-12 district language arts committee fostered book clubs, strategy demonstrations, voluntary summer workshops, and initiation of a literacy coaching model for the district. With the support of the Ball Foundation, they studied the benefits of developing a K-12 literacy framework,

using the work of Nancy Frey and Doug Fisher at City Heights in San Diego, CA, as a model. Common practices and language unite the staff at every level, according to Connie. Literacy coaches model consistent practices for teachers and provide a time for feedback, questions, and reflection of how that practice can be transported to other classrooms and content areas.

Leaders must lay a foundation, knowing that the paving bricks are the participation of the staff around data-driven instructional decision making. In Northview, a Data Diggers Group was formed to serve as a leadership group to determine effective best practices that impact student achievement. This group helps teachers discover what works and what is ineffective, and this changes practice. The results go to the grade level professional learning community groups to be acted upon.

"Before we just patted ourselves on the back when we did well, or felt badly when we didn't. You can't just have generic wishes for success. When collaborative groups put a practice and the data under the microscope, they identify the steps they can take to improve practice. We continually have to analyze what the data are telling us and make changes as a result. We now realize that we have to calendar those opportunities to really analyze what we are doing and its impact on student achievement. Again, we can't just wish for success," says Connie Petter.

Shared leadership will be the sustaining factor for Northview's future. Teachers and administrators now participate in design teams when planning a process, activity, or event. Many voices are heard and weigh in

# NORTHVIEW

on how to operationalize an instructional application, a use of data, a literacy strategy, a process to engage in rich and meaningful conversations, to name a few. In the words of Megan Czarnopys, a relatively new teacher in Northview, “When you invite people in they are happy to be leaders. They just have to be invited. It makes people feel valued. Lots more people are on board and getting pulled in because they legitimately know their perspective is heard and they can affect the way things are done.”

Lighting the way for the future demands many voices in the room and many people at the table. It has evolved to be Northview’s way of illuminating and guiding their work so they can make informed and collaborative instructional decisions. They are leaving a “light of learning” on for each other. ■

***Reflection Questions:** What processes, practices are in place in your school to guide collaborative, instructional decision making? How does your school foster a collaborative culture where all voices are welcome in the process?*

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## It’s Never Done

Maureen Grey

There is a story about an elderly employee who worked for a brass door manufacturing company. His job was to polish brass doors and buff them to a radiating shine. A visitor to the company passed the man one day and asked, “How do you know when it’s done?” The employee answered, “It’s never done; they just take this door away, and bring me another.”

Kathie Lewis, a middle school teacher in Northview Public Schools, echoes a similar sentiment when she describes the continual learning journey as part of a district involved in transformation. Kathie says they are continually reflecting, discussing, and striving to find ways to improve their instructional practice and recognize that they are never done. “I considered myself a good teacher at the outset of the initiative [the Northview partnership with the Ball Foundation]. I varied instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, developed creative and engaging lessons, and held high expectations for my students and myself. I also consulted with grade level peers about curriculum. However, I did not regularly meet with them to collaborate about best

Effective teachers recognize that they are a dynamic part of a learning journey to reflect, analyze and improve their practice.

practice, review formative/summative data, or discuss student remediation or enrichment opportunities. Although I found great success with students, my focus was more about teaching the content than student learning.”

With determination and encouragement, teachers continued down the highway of learning. In Kathie’s words, “It is extremely important to note that any district that takes on the challenge of change will encounter difficulties and must persevere. All of us are

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still at different places, but much farther down the road toward greater student achievement than when we first began.”

Northview identified the need to develop a consistent literacy framework that could articulate common and aligned literacy practices K-12. With data to support the need for such a framework, teachers eagerly joined other district language arts experts to work on a summer initiative to develop one.

Literacy frameworks were reviewed from a number of sources. The City Heights Literacy Framework from consultants Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey served as a reference point. Kathie states, “We put our pieces into it, modified it in light of what we had learned, but we need to remember that any district has to make a framework their own, based upon the needs of their district and with lots of dialogue.”

The work of the Ball Foundation is identified as stimulating a climate of learning, according to Lewis. “We are district experts and have been encouraged by Ball to have the confidence to improve our instructional practice by being reflective, taking parts of their model and transforming it to what works for us. They have really pushed our thinking and I’m really proud of the work we’ve done,” Kathie says. “No product is ever ‘finished’--it needs to be continually revisited, refined and improved based upon the results we are getting in student learning. We continue to realize not only our potential, but more importantly, the promise for students.” ■

### *Reflection Questions:*

*What are the changes occurring around you, at the classroom and district level, that demand an open mind? Why should teachers continually modify and enhance all frameworks, lessons, and curriculum?*



*Time for reflection and dialogue is essential for the change process.*

## COMMENTARY

# RECONNECTING LEARNING AND SCHOOLING

Bob Hill

In the preface of her seminal work *The Power to Transform: Leadership that Brings Learning and Schooling to Life*, Stephanie Pace Marshall reminds us that:

“The nature of schooling as we know it has become the unquestioned answer to educating our children. *It is not*. Knowing what we now know, we can no longer do what we now do. It is time to reconnect our children [and our systems] to their abundant learning potentials and reengage them in the joy of learning.”

The “what we now know” that Dr. Marshall points us toward is found in the definition provided by the American Psychological Association (APA) that learning is “a natural process of pursuing personally meaningful goals, and it is active, volitional, and internally mediated.” One does not have to spend much time visiting classrooms to see that the “what we now do” is something quite different from the “what we now know.”

In the Ball Foundation’s work with schools and school districts we seek to build organizational capacity and professional learning. Thus, there is a much more direct link to the learning of adults in the system than to that of students. We count on those adult learners (school staff) to successfully engage students in the type of learning described above. The foundation engages its partners with an approach based upon the belief that the adult learning in the system would be most powerful if it fit the APA definition above. However, we most often see professional learning that is externally directed, grounded in the deficit thinking of “fixing” something or some group, or the notion that some expert has new solutions that can be poured into the system (and into the heads and hearts of staff members) that will produce better student achievement.

Most professional development that we observe today is based on the notion that the capacity of professional educators can be increased by exposing them to more expert information—without opportunities to have input into their learning agenda, to reflect collectively on their learning, and to take time to practice new skills while being coached. In other words, the actions we take in providing professional development to staff suggest that they can learn effectively simply by being exposed to more and more content about their practice. Is it any wonder then that when these teachers and principals go to work in their schools and classrooms they approach their students in much the same way?

What I have described is a part of our system of schooling that has evolved over the course of the last century, one that is externally driven and prescribed. The transformation that the Ball Foundation works toward in its partnerships is embodied in a re-thinking of the relationship of learning and schooling, for both the adults in the system who teach and support teaching and the students in every classroom. ■

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## REFLECTIONS AND CELEBRATIONS AS PARTNERSHIPS END

The 2006-2007 school year is the final year of formal partnership between the Ball Foundation and Springfield (IL) Public School District, Northview (MI) Public Schools, and Chula Vista (CA) Elementary School District.

A series of celebrations are being held this spring to thank district staff for their commitment, reflect on past successes, and look forward to sustaining the work after the formal partnerships end. Dates for these events are as follows:

- Northview Public Schools: April 17
- Chula Vista Elementary School District: May 22 and 23
- Springfield Public School District: May 31

Stories from these celebrations will appear in the next edition of *Review*.