District-wide Instructional Initiative Framework

Bank Street Education Center
Instructional change at scale requires input and engagement from multiple stakeholders as we work together to imagine design, and implement change. Such a process leverages diverse experiences, perspectives, and approaches, which accurately describe our process of codifying and documenting the framework in this publication. We’re lucky to have many thoughtful partners on our District-wide Instructional Improvement (DII) framework journey.

We are grateful to our many school system partners who have engaged with us over the last several years, especially our New York Network Districts (Rochester City School District, Syracuse City School District, Utica City School District, and Yonkers Public Schools), where our team used the DII as an organizing framework for supporting improvement work. District feedback regarding the DII’s benefits and limitations have been invaluable.

We’re also grateful for the New York Network Team (past and present) at Bank Street, including current team members; Katherine Baldwin, Rachel Bello, and Tarima Levine; former team members, Marisa Campbell, Kaity Lynch, and Amy Wang; and our consultants Vincent Brevetti and Christina Fuentes, who have all used and refined the DII tool in their district partnership work. We are also indebted to Michelle Forman, lead author of Internal Coherence Framework: Creating Conditions for Continuous Learning in Schools. After working for a decade with Harvard Graduate School of Education, Michelle is now a member of Bank Street’s New York Network Team, bringing her invaluable practical and research experience to bear on this work.

We are also thankful to Rebecca Stilwell, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University for grounding our district-wide improvement elements within a rich body of education research. We also offer great thanks to Jonayah Marie Jackson, who led the graphic design for the report.

Many other thought partners have provided beneficial feedback and input along the way, including, but not at all limited to, Shael Polakow-Suransky, President of Bank Street College; Meghan Cliffel, a former Bank Street team member, who helped refine the initial versions of what would become the DII framework; and Elana Karopkin, an educational consultant and former Regional Superintendent for Achievement First, who led us through the “criteria for success” activity that gave birth to the DII tool.

We are especially thankful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York, both of which provided generous funding in support of the district partnerships and made the DII framework revision process possible through forums that enabled feedback and conversation on early versions of the tool.
Dear Reader,

Welcome to the Bank Street Education Center. We invite you to explore our District-wide Instructional Initiative Framework, a tool that guides our partnership work with school districts who are engaged in a process of instructional improvement. We developed the framework out of research on district improvement, organizational development, school leadership, and professional learning, as well as our own experience implementing large-scale district reform in the largest school district in the nation: New York City.

Although several leadership and reform frameworks and principles have been put forth by others, we created this tool because we were unable to identify another framework that captured all of the essential components that keep teachers, classroom practice, and students at the center of the work. Our framework puts a focus on schools as the unit of change. It includes components familiar to district leaders and researchers: leadership vision and commitment; project management structures; intentional adult learning experiences; and staying evidence-based and student-focused. Since the primary function of this tool is to ground our partnership approach with schools and districts, we have avoided using it as a rubric or a checklist. It is not intended to be used as an evaluative instrument. Instead, we set out to create a document that could be used to holistically describe the key elements of successful district-wide instructional reform.

Beginning in 2015, we piloted the framework with several districts across the country, calibrating internally with our staff, and revising the framework along the way. We see it as a living document that will continue to improve as we learn more. As you peruse the pamphlet, you’ll see that it is divided into three main interactive sections—first, the framework itself; second, how we use the framework in our partnerships with school districts; and third, an introduction to our team, as well as a list of our current and past partnerships. By clicking on the links within the pages, you can explore, in any order, the sections and their components.

If you are considering embarking on a district-wide instructional improvement strategy, we hope you will find this useful in your own work, and will consider partnering with the Bank Street Education Center if you are embarking on a district-wide instructional improvement strategy. We invite you to contact us with any questions and comments you may have about our framework or to hear more about our partnership work with the districts we have highlighted in this document.

Sincerely,

Doug Knecht
Executive Director
Bank Street Education Center
The Bank Street Education Center works with schools, districts, states, teacher preparation programs, and communities across the country to advance system-wide change and support capacity building to improve the care and education of students from birth through higher education, as well as the adults who support them. Through our partnerships, we are building an evidence base to inform local practice while addressing some of the nation’s deepest organizational challenges currently hindering system-wide effective and equitable teaching and learning.

“Through our Ed Center partnership, I recognized the importance of working with schools and teachers in helping them create connections between their instructional decisions and student learning.”

-School District Leader

We partner with school systems and districts to improve teaching practice at scale through strategic guidance, professional learning, and coaching. We believe that to shift teacher practice at scale, there must be a throughline of teaching and learning that connects every layer of the school system. We use an approach to systems-level instructional improvement that builds a coherent throughline from the central office and pedagogical supervisors to teacher teams and their students. We pair professional learning with strategic planning supports that aid districts in creating, strengthening, and monitoring learning conditions so that investments in professional learning pay off in improved results.

Annually, $15 billion and 70 hours per teacher are spent on professional learning, but these investments are failing to show results in classroom practice and student outcomes at scale. Too often these resources are wasted in "one-shot" training sessions and other professional learning offerings that are not integrated into well-planned instructional change that connects all levels of the school system. We believe students deserve better.

Through our work with schools and communities, we have served 6,800 educators, including 5,800 preschool and early childhood leaders, to enact real change. And through the educators with whom we have partnered, we have been able to reach 341,605 children across the country.
INTRODUCTION
Our framework includes components we have identified from research and from our own leadership experiences at the New York City Department of Education. We believe that when these elements of a school system’s approach work in tandem, they effectively create conditions that support and empower teachers and school leaders to coherently improve instructional practices within and across schools -- for all students.

THE DISTRICT-WIDE INSTRUCTIONAL INITIATIVE FRAMEWORK

LEADERSHIP VISION & COMMITMENT
Successful school and district leaders use research as well as district and school level data to develop a vision for instructional improvement -- within each school and across the whole district.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES
Successful districts empower teachers and school leaders to envision and implement instructional change through the structures and systems they create.

INTENTIONAL ADULT LEARNING EXPERIENCES
Successful school districts carefully craft learning experiences for adults.

EVIDENCE-BASED & STUDENT-FOCUSED DECISION-MAKING
Successful school districts build a common language and use data to inform and describe instructional practice and student learning.
1. LEADERSHIP VISION & COMMITMENT

A. Vision: Leaders assess the district's key needs and create a clear vision for instructional improvement. The vision is articulated with language that positions classrooms and schools as units of change and teachers and school leaders as the change agents. Those driving the work throughout the layers of the system have honed in on the right scope for the project, ensuring that it is “big” or “deep” enough to impact students across schools, increase system coherence, and address issues of equity, such as high expectations for all students.

B. Policy and Resources: Instructional policies, resources, and tools support, guide, and ensure the intended instructional shifts across classrooms. They are thoughtful, aligned, and commensurate with the level of challenge and the expected changes in practices. Specifically, they support school leaders in bringing coherence to school culture and structures so that instructional improvement can occur in the intended ways.

C. Commitment to Improvement: There is a shared belief that this project will only be successful if: individuals and teams throughout the system identify the competencies, skills, and knowledge they need to develop; own their work (even if some aspects are outsourced); leaders are comfortable publicly sharing what they are learning; and everybody can articulate how their learning supports the desired changes in school culture, structures, and instructional practices.

IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTIONS

“It is very important for principals to have a clear vision for instruction with the expectation that teachers provide students with the necessary content and tasks that leads to academic achievement.”

-Cleveland District Representative
A. Defining and Engaging Stakeholders: System leaders engage with the system and community (e.g., rigorous and publicized listening tours, intentional shaping of the issues at hand through the use of research data and student outcomes, etc.) and build a comprehensive yet strategic list of people/roles to engage, in particular teachers and other school-based leaders. Each constituency knows that district leaders will be listening to and integrating their voice, thoughts, and experiences throughout the process.

B. Project Planning for Accountability: The “who,” “what,” and “by when” are clearly established, assigned to team members, and supported. A calendar is created of all meetings, check-ins, reflection moments, deadlines, and communications, including a plan for engaging and communicating with stakeholders throughout the project. Leaders have established clear performance metrics with corresponding management systems and commit to providing accountability to those they manage throughout the initiative so that teacher and school leaders are ultimately empowered to coherently improve their culture, structures, and instruction.

C. Looking Back and Looking Forward: Structures are established to collect data in an ongoing fashion, and time is built in to bring key groups together (e.g., district and teacher leaders, those in charge of operations) to step back, reflect, and make data-based adjustments, as well as to come together to think about the best next steps and strategy for the next phase.

DEEP DIVE

“We must narrow our focus to go deeper and be more strategic with our systems.”

-RCSD Fall 2017 Convening Participant
3. INTENTIONAL ADULT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

A. Instructional Design and Professional Development Mapping: The design of the initiative focuses on the right instructional content and skill development, including leadership training for teachers and other key constituents who work across classrooms and on central teams. Additionally, the various groupings of adults who need to convene at different times and for different purposes are strategically linked and built into a professional learning map with a scope and sequence that connects all groupings with the right expectations, goals, and resources.

B. Reflective Supervision: Developmental goals, strategic objectives, and associated information/metrics are explicitly matched to reflective supports for growth (check-in for mentoring, weekly data reporting, etc.). Leaders meet with everyone involved, from content and operations to teachers and supervisors at the school level, so that strong outcomes are ensured.

C. “Walks the Walk”: Facilitators of professional learning experiences and other meetings (e.g., step back meetings) model characteristics of effective instruction. They make sure participants are doing genuine intellectual work and model practices that can be turn-keyed in other PDs, in the classroom, and in strong PLCs (co-constructing group norms with participants, building trust).

EFFECTIVENESS OF INSTRUCTION

“[What resonated most with me was] the necessity of looking closely at the learning target to assess the effectiveness of instruction. Then have the skillset and courage to have a professional discussion to brainstorm ways to improve outcomes for students.”

-Rochester District Leader
A. Common Language: The initiative explicitly builds a common instructional language/taxonomy of instruction and competencies so that educators have common reference points, don’t talk past one another, and agree on common definitions of “what good work looks like” at all layers of the system: teachers and teams, school leadership, and central and field staff.

B. Evidence-Based: Leaders have set the expectation that discussions, claims, meetings, and check-ins are driven by an examination of relevant data and evidence that is understood through the lens of a common language. As often as possible, evidence is grounded in low-inference data/observations (including, but not limited to, classroom and school visits) so that judgments and findings are not driven by preference, habit, or personality, but rather by an examination of what’s working for students and educators.

C. Student-Focused: Data being collected and monitored should be biased toward looking at student work (including student actions, talk, and perspectives), as well as teacher work. All are examined collaboratively using agreed upon protocols.

CONSENSUS

“We need to “push the thinking” within district groups towards consensus on what key levers/drivers will be utilized by all on a consistent basis to move the work forward for the districts.”

-Spring 2018 Convening Participant
The Bank Street Education Center uses its District-wide Instructional Initiative (DII) Framework to ground our partnerships with districts in student and adult learning. The framework provides a lens through which we can view district, school, and classroom practices, and can co-plan steps to ensure the sustainable implementation of instructional initiatives at a district scale. The Education Center and its district partners use the DII to:

- Create a Shared Language
- Identify Strengths and Areas for Growth
- Develop an Individualized Approach in Each District
- Guide Decision-Making
- Reflect on Progress and Plan Next Steps
The DII delineates four research-based elements that the Education Center has identified as crucial to implementing and sustaining strong instructional practice across districts. These are:

1) Leadership, Vision, and Commitment;
2) Change Management Structures;
3) Intentional Adult Learning Experiences; and
4) Evidence-Based and Student-Focused Decision-making.

These elements enable Bank Street Education Center staff to internally calibrate their understanding of the necessary components of district improvement and to communicate that understanding to their district partners.

The DII Framework was developed in consultation with four large districts in New York State, and the result is a set of concepts that is informed by both current research and practitioner knowledge. The DII is used by leaders and staff alike to describe current district conditions and practices and to build a shared understanding of necessary next steps.
IDENTIFY STRENGTHS & AREAS FOR GROWTH

The DII helps districts and Education Center staff identify areas of strength and places for growth in each district. Staff and leaders use the framework to assess the degree to which each of the elements is present within their district. The descriptors, or sub-elements, provide a tool to analyze conditions and practices in fine-grain detail. They consider, for example, how well district policies reflect the instructional vision of the district or how closely the professional learning experiences available to adults support the objectives of the instructional initiative the district seeks to implement.
DEVELOP AN INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH IN EACH DISTRICT

The Bank Street Education Center uses the DII as a way to learn about each district in depth and to provide individualized support for teachers and leaders. Bank Street project directors plan individualized content and support based on a district’s needs, which are identified using the DII. During a weekly team meeting which includes facilitators, data analysts, and content developers, the Education Center tailors supports for district leaders, as well as professional learning sessions to support the teachers and leaders who are implementing high-quality instruction. In one district, the Education Center may help create content or structures for professional learning communities and, in another district, they may coach the central office staff who are charged with supervising classroom instruction.
GUIDE DECISION-MAKING

District leaders use the DII to set priorities and take action in their districts. The DII enables them to determine which initiatives can benefit the district the most and which may gain the most traction across the layers of the system. It also helps them ground leadership conversations, as well as conversations with other stakeholders, in a shared and research-based language that builds credibility for finding new ways of working together. Districts have used the DII to plan the launch of an initiative, that helps leaders consider organizational complexity in advance and helps the layers of the district move in the same direction.
Education Center staff reflect on the progress their district partners are making as expressed in their weekly reflective journals and meetings. These meetings are structured around prompts tied to the DII and the conversations are grounded in the crucial elements of district improvement.

During regular phone and in-person check-ins with districts, as well as at biannual convenings of district networks, the DII is used to reflect on the progress of planned initiatives and, with the Education Center's support, to work with the districts to plan next steps.
OUR LEADERSHIP & PARTNERS

OUR LEADERSHIP

Tracy Fray-Oliver
Deputy Executive Director
Programs and Implementation

Tracy Fray-Oliver is the Deputy Executive Director in the Bank Street Education Center where she leads the programmatic and implementation work for the organization and the New York Network Hub. Tracy began her career in education after graduating from John Jay College of Criminal Justice as a middle school math teacher. After earning her master’s degree in Mathematics Education from Brooklyn College, she transitioned into the role of a math coach and instructional specialist. Inspired by her work at the school level, Tracy continued her commitment to curriculum and instruction in the New York City Department of Education central office where she served in a variety of roles, including Director of Mathematics Curriculum and the Common Core Fellows Program.

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Emily Sharrock
Deputy Executive Director
Strategy & Systems

Emily Sharrock is the Deputy Executive Director of the Bank Street’s Education Center, where she oversees the Center’s strategy/operations and new program design. She has spent the majority of her career working in urban education management and public school reform, including 10 years at the New York City Department of Education. As a Network Leader, Emily oversaw the leadership, instructional and operational supports provided to more than 25 schools spanning K-12. She also served in different district-level policy, strategic planning, and management roles overseeing a variety of district reform efforts for the city. Additionally, Emily also served as a school designer supporting curriculum, instruction, and leadership development in Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning schools. Emily holds an MPA from Columbia University’s School for International and Public Affairs and a BA from Wesleyan University.

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Douglas Knecht
Executive Director
Bank Street Education Center

Doug Knecht is the founding Executive Director of the Bank Street Education Center. In this role, he leads large-scale instructional improvement engagements with districts and other school management and support organizations, bringing Bank Street’s deep expertise in adult learning and child development to central offices, schools, and classrooms across the country. Doug began his career as a high school science teacher in New Jersey after graduating from Princeton University. He then taught in New York City where he helped to start Humanities Preparatory Academy, a progressive public transfer school. Later, Doug earned a master’s degree from Harvard Graduate School of Education and returned to the New York City Department of Education, where he was responsible for the quality and effectiveness of supports to roughly 300 schools.

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Shael Suransky
President
Bank Street College

Shael Polakow-Suransky became the eighth president of Bank Street College of Education on July 1, 2014. Prior to this role, he was the second-in-command at the New York City Department of Education, serving as Chief Academic Officer and Senior Deputy Chancellor. In the nation’s largest school system, Shael oversaw teaching and learning across more than 1,600 district schools and was a strong advocate for teacher and principal autonomy, balanced accountability, and reforms designed to improve learning experiences for the city’s most vulnerable students. Earlier in his career, Shael worked as a teacher and founding principal of Bronx International High School. He holds a BA from Brown University, where Ted Sizer was his mentor, and a master’s degree in Educational Leadership from Bank Street. He is the first alumnus to serve as Bank Street’s president.

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