Road Map to
Developing a School Improvement Plan

Where School Planning Goes Wrong and How to Fix It — Rob Jentsch, Larry Stanton, Andrea Wolfe

This is a practical road map to facilitate and strengthen the school improvement planning process. It will help make school improvement planning better and easier for school leaders.

Successful school improvement begins with good planning. The right process results in a plan that, if well-executed, can dramatically improve student achievement. A flawed process may produce a plan that appears sound but ultimately falls short, wasting time, effort, money, and student potential. Many schools have worked diligently to craft and carry out plans that failed to improve student learning because they were missing crucial elements in their planning process.

Based on more than a decade supporting school improvement nationwide, Mass Insight has identified four critical stages in school improvement planning:

1. Diagnostic review
2. Root cause analysis
3. Developing strategies and goals
4. Building manageable action plans

Leaders who follow best practices in each of these stages and avoid common pitfalls lay the groundwork for transformational school change.

The first stage is a diagnostic review, also known as a comprehensive needs assessment, school audit, school quality review, and school readiness assessment (SRA), among others. In this stage there is an inventory of school strengths and challenges mapped out on a rubric or framework. Qualitative and quantitative evidence is considered and the team decides to focus on resolving two to four challenges that have resulted in subpar outcomes for students. In the second stage – root cause analysis – a school team traces what is causing the subpar outcomes. In the third stage – strategies and goals – the school team develops a strategy, defined as a set of coordinated activities that, if established and carried out, will move a school toward its goal by addressing those two to four challenges. In the final stage – manageable action plans – the team agrees to who is going to do what by when in order to reach milestones that will indicate progress towards goals. The action plans will be continuously reviewed and revised based on implementation, improvement, and impact data.

As a first step, a school should establish a representative planning team. In addition to school leaders, the team should include teachers representing a range of grade levels and areas of expertise, such as reading, math, and special education. In high schools, it is often helpful to include a staff member from the counseling office. A planning team with diverse perspectives is better positioned to identify problems, generate workable solutions, and develop the "buy-in" needed to carry the plan to fruition.

In this road map you will see a common school improvement planning scenario that you may encounter, our analysis about what went right and what did not, our ideas for setting up the planning process to be as successful as possible, and a checklist of best practices and common pitfalls to help you with implementation.

Diagnostic Review

Before setting a new direction for a school, the planning team needs an accurate assessment of current school and district practices and context that matter to student learning. Below is an example of a diagnostic review that had a lot going for it, but ultimately fell short:

Common Scenario: Diagnostic Review

Angela, the principal of Ward Elementary School, was eager to complete the state-mandated diagnostic review with her school leadership team. To prepare for the meeting, Angela asked each team member to review Ward's state test scores for the last three years. She also asked them to review the state's school diagnostic tool that asks the school to assess its performance on 20 elements grouped into four domains: rigorous instruction, school culture, talent, and family and community engagement.

Angela began the meeting with a quick review of Ward's test scores noting that they have been "pretty consistent" over the past three years and that they'd all like to see them improved. One teacher suggested that students really struggle with the new standards. Angela then reviewed grade-by-grade MAP scores highlighting the fact that students in the lower grades are making more gains than students in the upper grades. She wondered aloud if the lower grade scores bode well for the future and if they might be due to the success of the new district Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiative, which provides teachers with time to plan lessons and assessments together. Several teachers commented that PLC time was well liked by the lower-grade teachers.

Angela then asked the group of eight to divide into four pairs and asked each pair to rate the elements in one domain using a four-level rubric (does not meet, somewhat meets, meets, consistently meets, or exceeds). After 25 minutes, she reconvened the full group and each pair reported on their ratings. Three of the four pairs rated all the elements with the two highest ratings. The family and community engagement pair rated all the elements at the second level and reported that, apart from a core group, parents are too busy to visit the school. The full team agreed with all the recommended ratings with little discussion.

Common Scenario Analysis:

Angela had a decent framework, included some data in the discussion, and invited participation. That's all good. But ultimately the team was left without a clear vision for what needed to improve to put student performance on an upward trajectory. The conclusion of this example discussion is that things are going pretty well and everyone's doing what they can. It begs the question: what will the school focus on to improve?

The discussion did not yield a clear focus on what must change first to be on the road to improvements in student learning. More data might have helped: they looked only at academic achievement and otherwise rated

themselves on the framework absent other quantitative measures. We wonder, for instance, about attendance, office referrals, student mobility, and dropout rates among other helpful data points.

Additionally, Angela's planning team was made up solely of school staff and teachers and lacked an outside perspective. Often when those conducting a diagnostic are the same individuals doing the hard, day-to-day work of school improvement, it's difficult to objectively identify strengths and weaknesses in school practice.

How to set up an effective Diagnostic Review:

A successful diagnostic begins with a framework that helps schools focus on strengthening practices proven to lead to the greatest gains in student achievement. Mass Insight's theory of action and aligned School Readiness Assessment is one such framework, but there are many others – often the district or state has one and many partner organizations have them available as well. When a third party can do a site visit and provide a written review (often called a comprehensive needs assessment, school quality review or school readiness assessment), there are often useful insights and an opportunity to gather the perspectives of more stakeholders (i.e. more teachers, students, parents), setting the school planning team up for a more robust conversation.

Mass Insight also recommends having data that correspond to a handful of indicators disaggregated and at the discussion table for the diagnostic review stage. We call this a school's 'Data Profile' and our standard practice is to have the following at a minimum (Table 1), though we prefer having additional data. We recommend disaggregating the data by student subgroup in order to illuminate potential equity gaps that can sometimes be missed.

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Table 1: School Data profile for the past 3 years:			
Enrollment & Demographics	**School Climate**	**Student Acheivement Data**	**Other**
• Student enrollment • Student demographics (Special Education, Limited English Proficient, Free/Reduced lunch or other SES measure) • Student mobility rate • Teacher demographics	• Student attendance rate • Suspension rates/# • Expulsion rates/# • Student dropout rate by grade level (high school only) • Perception data (teacher, student, parent surveys, PLC)	• State assessment performance • Graduation rates	• School accountability indicator (last 3 years)

Drawing on outside expertise can greatly improve the quality of a diagnostic. While schools can use a framework to examine their own work without external help, a consultant or district expert is often better able to ask hard questions and objectively analyze evidence of strengths and weaknesses, which produces more accurate results.

Ideally, district leadership, most often the principal supervisor, contributes to the diagnostic either as a full participant or "critical friend" who can review preliminary findings and either confirm findings or encourage additional analysis.

Once strengths and challenges are surfaced, the planning team should prioritize two to four problems that have resulted in subpar outcomes for students, that are within the control of the school or district. These should be the starting point for the root cause analysis that follows.

Best Practices: Diagnostic Review

- **Outside expertise:** Consultants and/or district staff not embedded in the school provide input
- **Data:** Several metrics that paint a picture of the school's overall health and key contextual factors
- **Structured process:** Diagnostic tool aligned with a school effectiveness framework

Common Pitfalls: Diagnostic Review

- **No outside expertise:** Only school staff conduct the diagnostic
- **Lack of focus:** Identifies many problems without clearly identifying the most important ones to address first
- **Lack of balance** between qualitative and quantitative data

Root Cause Analysis

Analyzing the root causes of problems leading to low student achievement is a crucial but frequently overlooked step in the school planning process. When schools neglect the root cause analysis, they may fail to address problems that ultimately undermine their efforts to improve. A successful root cause analysis requires strong protocols and experienced facilitation. Below is an example of what happens when some of these requirements are lacking.

Common Scenario: Root Cause Analysis

It's August and a new principal, Thomas, arrives at Lincoln Middle School and meets with the instructional leadership team charged with crafting the school improvement plan. Thomas has a copy of an audit report conducted by a third party in May. The report is clear that student behavior is causing a significant loss of instructional time in more than half of Lincoln classrooms. "Why is this happening?" Thomas asks his new team. One teacher on the team, John, says that the office does not give students sufficiently severe consequences and as a result, students feel like they can act out in class without repercussion. Another teacher reminds John that Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) is a major district focus – changing student behavior is supposed to rely on rewards, not punishments. John is silent. Thomas, sensing that this may be important to dig into asks: why isn't PBIS leading to better behavior? A teacher says, "Well, the PBIS store doesn't have anything kids want." Three other teachers nod vigorously. When Thomas asks why, one teacher says the only reward that would motivate students to behave is expensive technology. Another teacher says that there aren't strong partnerships with the PTA or other organizations that would be able to donate PBIS store items. Thomas writes partnerships on the white board and circles the word. "Sounds like this is a potential strategy. We'll come back to this," he says, before moving to another topic.

Common Scenario Analysis:

Thomas is doing a lot right by pushing his staff to consider the reasons that strategies around student behavior are falling short. A less skilled principal might skip the analysis process entirely and jump straight to generating solutions – e.g., "what are we going to do about student behavior?" At the same time, while Thomas led the team to dig into the problem more deeply, their analysis likely did not uncover the problem's root cause. A closer look at the school's diagnostic report reveals that 56% of the Lincoln faculty has less than two years teaching experience and that classroom observations found very limited evidence of classroom routines and procedures.

In this attempted root cause analysis, a lack of structured protocols and an incomplete consideration of the diagnostic findings resulted in an incorrect hypothesis – that lack of partnerships and ability to source PBIS goodies is leading to student behavior problems. Time and effort are now likely to be dedicated to an ineffective strategy. In our experience, it is just as common for a school to errantly name a root cause as to accurately name one. Correctly identifying root causes helps schools avoid costly investments in the wrong solutions and instead pursue those that produce results.

How to set up an effective Root Cause Analysis:

Analyzing the root causes of problems leading to low student achievement is a crucial but frequently overlooked step in the school planning process. When schools neglect the root cause analysis, they may fail to address problems that ultimately undermine their efforts to improve. To uncover root causes of school challenges, schools need strong protocols and facilitation.

Mass Insight often begins with the "Five-Whys" protocol which helps teams get past circumstances beyond their control. We've found that strong facilitation is particularly important in identifying root causes, because good analysis requires that all perspectives are heard and recognized, that the discussion focuses on the evidence, and that the team remain solution-oriented.

> **To uncover root causes of school challenges, schools need strong protocols and facilitation.**

At a representative but fictional elementary school with a state accountability grade of F in the Midwest – let's call it Green Elementary – Mass Insight conducted a School Readiness Assessment. In the previous two years, the principal had led a culture and climate transformation. Attendance had increased while office referrals had decreased from over 1,200 last school year to 240 this school year. But student performance was low and stagnant. The Mass Insight School Readiness Assessment indicated that instruction was largely teacher-centered: for instance students were spending a lot of time copying notes from the board, leaving them unprepared for the performance demands of the state standards. We were in a conference room with the school leadership team about to kick off a root cause analysis. As facilitators, our Mass Insight team had established norms, explained the Five-Whys protocol, described pitfalls of the process, and said that ultimately we would know if we had landed on a root cause if we were to trace the suggested root cause to what we were observing.

> **Good root cause analysis surfaces what's holding back dramatic improvement.**

The problem identified in the diagnostic stage was that teaching practices were outdated and not engaging. We asked our series of "Five-Whys" questions, learning: (1) teachers had not been taught to teach using more engaging methods; (2) academic coaches were not coaching teachers frequently; (3) coach time was instead being used to monitor student behavior plans and check in with identified students throughout the day; (4) the dean who was supposed to be doing that (rather than coaches) was spending all of his time on special ed compliance paperwork; (5) roles and responsibilities, including compliance and special ed support from the district were unclear.

If you asked how to jumpstart student academic growth in a school with stagnant performance, reallocating and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of support staff in the building would not be the obvious solution. But that's what a good root cause analysis does – it surfaces what's holding back dramatic improvement. In the year following a root cause conversation, Mass Insight has seen schools like Green Elementary move significantly on the state accountability system. In situations similar to Green, for instance, we have found that there were amazing

academic coaches who hadn't been coaching. Providing the coaches time to coach teachers was a linchpin for improving classroom practice and ensuring students had access to rigorous instruction.

In our experience, it's ideal that the principal supervisor also be engaged in the discussion of root causes. If the school team determines the root cause of an issue to be out of their control but within that of the district (e.g., hiring timelines, adjustment transfer policy, district mandated curricula), the principal supervisor can make or advocate for changes to district policy or practice. In the case of Green, the principal supervisor worked with the office of special education to improve supports to ease the compliance paperwork burden placed on building personnel. In most cases, a failure to change district conditions doesn't prevent the school from addressing problems that are within the direct control of the school. Green was still able to reallocate roles and responsibilities – the district support helped but was not the determining factor.

A strong root cause analysis lays the groundwork for selecting strategies that allow a school to surmount its challenges and reach its goals.

Best Practices: Root Cause Analysis

- **Strong impartial facilitation:** Someone who is able to ensure that all perspectives are heard and recognized, that the discussion of what's causing the current reality focuses on data and evidence over hunch and opinion, and that the team remain solution-oriented
- **Builds on diagnostic findings:** Focuses on the challenges surfaced in a diagnostic and ideas about what causes a problem are tested against the evidence
- **Strong protocols and tools:** The Five-Whys protocol and other templates with clear instructions for use can facilitate deeper analysis

Common Pitfalls: Root Cause Analysis

- **Ignores diagnostic findings:** Analysis does not start with evidence from the diagnostic, or only considers partial evidence
- **Shallow analysis:** Analysis limited to symptoms of problems rather than actual root causes - often because there is no protocol or weak adherence to it

Strategies and Goals

By setting goals and identifying strategies for meeting those goals, a school leadership team can organize and focus the work of the school staff. Clear strategies can also help teachers and other staff understand and connect their work to solving the challenges that face them each day.

Common Scenario: Strategies and Goals

At their first two planning meetings, Jane (the principal of Monroe K-8 Community School) and her leadership team identified improving math instruction as a priority and a lack of structured teacher time for planning math instruction as the root cause. Based on data on the performance of other district schools and the cut scores in the state accountability system, the team decided that they needed to increase the number of students meeting standards in math by 15% over the next three years.

Jane encouraged her planning team to begin brainstorming possible ways to dramatically improve math performance. The team quickly agreed that the grade level PLC teams had not prioritized math in their weekly 90-minute meetings. Two teachers reported that their teams often didn't talk about math at all. One teacher suggested, "Since math is the school priority for next year, we should reserve two-thirds of our PLC time – at least 60 minutes per week – for math-related planning." There was quick consensus that dedicating 60 minutes each week to math planning in every grade level team should be a goal for the year. The team agreed that if they could meet that goal, they were confident that math instruction would improve.

Following the meeting Jane looked at the calendar for the upcoming year and realized that district-directed activities were scheduled for four of the first six grade level PLC meeting times. The ELA coach, who regularly attends PLC meetings, said that she thought additional time for math would make a difference with six of the nine grade level teams, but was concerned that the 4th and 7th grade teams would require help with meeting facilitation to use the additional time effectively.

When the team reconvened, the 4th and 7th grade teachers on the team agreed with the coach's assessment that they needed facilitation help. Jane said that she and the ELA coach would develop a schedule to ensure that one of them was available to help plan and facilitate each meeting of the 4th and 7th grade teams. She also reported that she had talked with her district supervisor and was able to move the district-directed programs to times that did not conflict with PLCs. Teachers suggested that their plan should also include recommitting to using the district math curriculum and assessments.

Common Scenario Analysis:

Jane's team took a very practical approach to solving its math problem. It went something like 'If math is our priority and we believe that grade level instructional planning can improve instruction, then let's devote as much of our available planning time as possible to math.' The team's initial decision to devote more PLC time to math was a good one but it was insufficient.

Fortunately, Jane continued to dig after the meeting. She looked at the district calendar and saw that their plan to increase time for math planning would be blocked by district claims on PLC time. She also followed up with the instructional coach to get her assessment of grade level teams' capacity to do effective instructional planning. With this information, she was able to remove obstacles to the team's math strategy.

How to set up effective Strategies and Goals:

Strategy is a set of coordinated activities that, if established and carried out, will move a school toward its goal. Mass Insight encourages planning teams to articulate a theory of action for each of its strategies. The theory of action is a testable hypothesis describing what the team is committing to do and what it expects will happen as a result. It urges the planning team to address the conditions necessary for success and to consider the resources available. In Jane's school the theory of action for the math strategy could be something like this (Table 2).

Table 2

If:	Then:
• If we commit to using 2/3 of our grade level team PLC time on planning math instruction; and • If weekly our 90-minute grade level team time can be used for school directed work; and • If we assess internal capacity of each of our grade level PLCs to effectively plan instruction and determine which team would benefit from facilitation; and • If we use the district's monthly math assessments at all grade levels to assess student progress and inform collaborative lesson planning; and • If we recommit to following the district's math curricular materials and schedule in all classrooms; and • If our two instructional coaches and the principal attend and facilitate every meeting of the PLCs that are identified as in need of assistance.	• PLCs will have the time necessary to do joint planning for math instruction; and • High quality facilitation will help PLC teams use their time and resources more effectively; and • Teachers will work together to analyze and use the data from monthly math assessments to plan their ins+truction; and • Instruction will be more aligned with standards and differentiated to meet the needs of individual students; and • The percentage of students meeting standards will increase by 15% and the percent of students exceeding standards will increase by 5%.

The process of writing the theory of action for the strategy forces the team to address the risks as well as the feasibility of the goal. Brainstorming about the other things that are necessary to make the initial good idea impactful can be very effective. If done well, the theory of action can turn a good idea into a powerful strategy to achieve a big goal.

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A strategy can also have smaller goals related to implementation that need to be tracked along the way. For instance, are the PLCs having weekly school-directed, 90-minute meetings? Are the principal and coaches attending and facilitating all the meetings of every high need PLC? Is there evidence from walk-throughs and observations that teachers are using the instructional plans that are developed in the PLCs?

Best Practices: Strategies and Goals

- **Theory of action:** Articulates a theory of action that connects the strategy to anticipated changes in outcomes
- **Clear and measurable goals:** Includes clear and measurable goals that are achievable

Common Pitfalls: Strategies and Goals

- **Undoable:** Unrealistic or not possible because of obstacles, capacity, or resources
- **Wrong focus:** None of the strategies target the instructional core
- **Not strategic:** Focuses on installing programs rather than advancing a strategy
- **Poor communication:** Teachers in the building are unaware of and/or do not understand the strategies
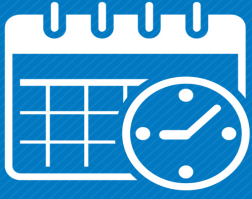
Manageable Action Plans

Action plans describe who is doing what when to advance the strategies. Because they define what needs to be done, assign responsibility, and lay out milestones, they make it possible to manage the work, track progress, and address and solve problems as they arise.

Common Scenario: Manageable Action Plans

Maria's school planning team had conducted a series of meetings to address student behavior, math instruction, and family engagement. Team members had agreed on strategies and developed theories of action for each strategy that included specific and measurable goals. At the end of their meeting, Maria offered to complete the district-mandated action plan template so the team could review it at their last meeting, three days before the deadline for submission. Maria completed the templates and, in order to avoid disagreements among the team, assigned responsibility for all of the action steps to herself and the assistant principal. Because the team had not discussed the schedule in any detail, she set the end of the school year as the deadline for every activity.

When the team met for their next and final meeting of the school year, they quickly reviewed the action plan, noting a couple of spelling and grammar errors, but they didn't discuss the action steps, assignments of responsibility, or timelines. At the end of the meeting, Maria congratulated the team for creating a strong plan and reminded them that they would meet monthly next year to manage plan implementation.

Common Scenario Analysis:

Too often school planning stops short of the finish line. Here, Maria's team developed strategies with theories of action and goals, but they failed to take the last step and figure out the action steps needed to move the plan forward, distribute responsibility, and set timelines. Maria, in an effort to avoid conflict and finish the plan document avoided the hard questions about responsibility and timelines.

If the district had provided a simple action plan template that prompted a conversation about what needs to happen to implement each strategy, the team could have identified the big steps necessary to advance their strategies. They could have also decided who was responsible for each step and identified deadlines and milestones for the process. Those conversations would have built the committee members' understanding of, and ownership for, the plan. With that in place, the team would be in a much better position to advance implementation when they return to school in the fall.

How to set up an effective Manageable Action Plan:

Teams should start with an action plan template that follows the Goldilocks principle – not too little detail and not too much. An action plan should describe the major activities needed to advance the strategy, who's responsible for each activity, and when each activity should begin and end. Table 3 shows an example of an action plan template for kicking off a school-wide student behavior initiative.

With this level of detail, Maria and the planning team know what needs to happen, and who needs to be held responsible. Had Maria brought this to the team as a draft, they could have assessed whether the individuals assigned responsibility have sufficient time and capacity to do the work that's described. If not, the plan could be revised, by getting additional time or capacity from the district, reducing the number of activities or slowing down implementation. You don't want an action plan that requires magic or Superman. Action plans can also include interim performance measures. For example, the percentage of teachers attending the training and using the activities on opening day help to set expectations and define success.

Some schools assign action plan development to teacher committees that extend beyond the team that developed the improvement plan. The risk with this approach is that teachers who weren't part of developing the initial plan may not understand what the team was trying to accomplish and go off in a new direction. Mass Insight recommends that one team develop both the strategies for improvement and the action plan for implementing them. Once there's an action plan, the work can be handed off to a committee to implement.

> **Teams should start with an action plan template that follows the Goldilocks principle – not too little detail and not too much.**

Table 3				
Action Step	**Responsible**	**Start**	**End**	**Milestone**
Plan student behavior training	Carol, assistant principal	6/15	7/15	Contract with trainer; schedule for two August PD days
Set up behavior rewards store	Pascale, lead teacher	8/15	8/22	Ready in time for first day of school and training
Conduct training for all teachers; including prep for opening day of classes	Carol, assistant principal	8/25 and 8/26	8/25 and 8/26	80% of teachers attend training; 90% of teachers attending report being ready to use new system on opening day
Grade level team meet to agree on what the behavior intervention looks like in their classrooms	PLC coordinators	8/27	8/27	Each grade level team meets
Opening day event in all classrooms	Maria, principal	9/3	9/3	Maria walks through all classes; 90% of classes using planned behavior activities

Finally, the school leadership team should regularly review all the action plans using the following questions:

- Are we doing what we said we would do in the plan?
- Is it making a difference? What's the evidence?
- If not, why not? What do we have to do differently?

As the school year progresses, action plans may need to be adjusted. For example, if it turns out that a delayed production of school swag prevents Pascale from setting up the behavior incentives store until September 15th, the team will have to decide how to encourage positive behavior without the rewards in the store. Those are the kinds of decisions that the principal and her leadership team should make as they manage the plan through the year.

School leadership should regularly ask:
- **Are we doing what we said we would do in the plan?**
- **Is it making a difference?**
- **If not, why not?**

Best Practices: Manageable Action Plans

- **Clear roles and timelines:** Plan specifies who is doing what by when
- **Ownership:** Those responsible for the actions have a hand in crafting them
- **Feasibility:** All actions are reviewed in their totality to evaluate overall feasibility before adopting plan
- **Resources:** Needed resources are named and made available
- **Ongoing review:** Scheduled conversations about what actions are or are not leading to change
- **Dynamic:** The action plan template is accessible and allows for adjustment when needed

Common Pitfalls: Manageable Action Plans

- **Too much detail:** Action plans include minute details without a clear connection to how the actions will lead to goals
- **Unfeasible:** The action plan requires more time, expertise, or resources than the school has available
- **Ignores critical resources and policies:** Plans should explicitly address required changes in the allocation or control of time, people, program, and budget
- **Lack of clarity:** Timeline and/or roles are unclear

Summary

Mass Insight's last decade of work with hundreds of schools in over a dozen states corroborates that school transformation is possible. A strong planning process can yield a manageable plan, and lay groundwork for collective responsibility for the implementation of that plan. When a plan addresses root causes of low performance in one or several areas, a school can grow quickly and begin to accelerate the potential of all of its students. Mass Insight has a range of school improvement services, including School Readiness Assessments (commonly called comprehensive needs assessments) and support with facilitating School Improvement Planning for individual schools and clusters of schools as well as supporting districts and states in the design of school improvement planning processes and tools. Don't hesitate to reach out to us if we can be of service.

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