

Marshall Memo 399

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
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3. Developing Theories of Action

In this helpful article in *The District Management Journal*, consultant Nicholas Morgan describes theories of action as “If... then...” statements that embody testable hypotheses about how change will occur. Answering three questions helps create a good theory of action:

- What do we believe?
- What do we look like now and what do we want to look like?
- How do we get there? What needs to change?

Ideally a school district has several theories of action linked together in a causal pathway to improvement. Incomplete or illogical chains do not produce results. For example, a district leader who says that “professional learning communities” or “response to intervention” are the theory of action is not going to get results.

Losing weight provides a classic example of good and bad theories of action. Saying, “I will eat less and thus will lose weight” is not a theory of action – it’s just hope. Here is a real theory of action from a weight-loss program:

- Create a baseline – know your starting weight;
- Set a goal – decide on the desired end weight;
- Tightly control calorie intake;
- Adhere to an exercise schedule – physical activity is required for success;
- Have a weekly weigh-in – this provides motivation and monitors progress;
- Adjust as needed – mid-course corrections are based on weekly weigh-ins;
- Celebrate success – plan for end of services.

The program is revised based on successes and failures of all participants and new program improvements are rolled out each year.

Here are some examples of possible school-district theories of action that hang together as an overall strategy:

- Teacher quality – By setting expectations for what is “effective teaching” and providing frequent feedback to teachers through classroom observations and verbal feedback, teacher instructional practice will improve and student achievement will rise.
- Principal autonomy – By shifting resource allocation and decision-making to the building level – where employees are most equipped to make decisions that benefit children – student achievement will increase.

- Earned autonomy – By allowing principals to earn autonomy over certain domains when they are successful in their buildings, the district can continue to hold all building leaders to certain standards but reward successful practices. As a result, the district will focus attention where it is needed most, and student achievement will rise.
- Professional learning communities – Frequent collaboration among teachers in a grade or subject, coupled with clear standards and measuring progress through common interim assessments and frequently reviewing student achievement data, will improve instructional practice and student achievement will rise.
- High expectations – By increasing and standardizing expectations for students and staff, they will be pushed harder to achieve great things, creating a culture of high performance and increasing teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

Morgan concludes with one theory of action that seems to make sense – *If we hold class sizes down, then individual attention between teachers and individual students will increase and student learning will improve* – and shows how it can ripple into some unarticulated theories of action, given finite resources. In effect, the implementation of the class-size theory of action means: “Cutting professional development, reducing support for principals to be instructional leaders by having fewer assistant principals, and decreasing teachers’ access to data by having fewer staff members in IT and the accountability office will not harm student learning.”

“Theories of Action: Aligning Priorities and Resources” by Nicholas Morgan and Nathan Levenson in *The District Management Journal*, Fall 2011 (Vol. 8, p. 38-46), <http://www.dmcouncil.org>; Morgan can be reached at nmorgan@dmcouncil.org.