



# **Understanding the Keys to Continuous School Improvement – Part 2**

## **A White Paper**

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In Part 1 of Understanding the Keys to Continuous School Improvement, the first four of eight strands or “keys” for school improvement were examined. The keys were based on a Georgia Department of Education document for all state schools entitled *School Keys – Unlocking Excellence through the Georgia School Standards* (2008). Each strand was summarized and discussed as to its critical nature for school success, followed by an explanation of how Elements™ can be used in collaboration with each strand to greater enhance school effectiveness and achievement. The same process will be continued in Part 2 as the final four keys are analyzed. It should be noted that while the Georgia document serves as the foundation for Parts 1 and 2, each of the eight keys are based on research from various highly regarded sources, such as Marzano (2003), Marzano, R.J., Pickering, D.J., and Pollock, J.E. (2001), along with SACS standards (AdvancED, 2007), and could apply to schools across the country.

Student, family, and community involvement and support is the fourth key. The strand considers these groups as being active participants in the school process and evidence must attest to this participation in a variety of areas. Standards within this key consist of active and sustained involvement of stakeholders, processes to ensure involvement and decision-making, and the school addressing stakeholder needs through appropriate services and partnerships. In



her book *The Right to Learn*, Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) states that “In these times when neighborhoods are less communal than in the past and especially in highly stressed locations, explicit efforts to build community are needed to keep students connected to education and connected to their futures” (p. 146). Therefore, it takes all aspects of a community or “village” to raise and educate our students.

The fifth key is professional learning and is defined as “...the means by which teachers, administrators and other school and system employees acquire, enhance and refine the knowledge, skills, and commitment necessary to create and support high levels of learning for all students” (Georgia Department of Education, 2008, p. 49). Standards for professional learning include quality professional learning communities (PLC’s), professional learning activities and processes are research-based and aligned with articulated goals, and strategies are included to enhance a variety of essential areas associated with student learning. Professional learning has undergone great transformation and enhancement in recent decades to become a very powerful, necessary and critical ingredient for all educators. As with all schooling aspects on-going professional learning is essential in promoting teacher and student learning. Nieto (2009) states that “Probably the most significant action school districts can take in changing the nature of professional development is to provide meaningful and engaging programs that respect the intelligence and good will of teachers and help them grow in terms of knowledge, awareness, and practice” (p. 8). Additionally, Nieto emphasizes how schools must find can continue to learn about themselves and their students.



Leadership is the seventh key and is defined as “The governance process through which individuals and groups influence the behavior of others so that they work collaboratively to achieve common goals and promote organizational effectiveness” (Georgia Department of Education, 2007, p. 67). The four standards that make up this strand are reinforcing high expectations, developing a supportive learning environment, sharing school improvement, and shared governance. Hoerr (2005) discusses the connection of leadership and relationships when he writes how good leaders change organizations, but great leaders change people. He further states that “People are the heart of any organization, particularly a school, and it is only through changing people...that an organization can flourish” (p. 7).

The final key to understanding continuous school improvement deals with idea of school culture. Many aspects of school culture are not tangible and difficult to measure or determine, but it is a reality of which all educators are familiar and know exist. It is defined by the Georgia Department of Education (2008) as “the norms, values, standards, and practices associated with the school as a learning community committed to ensuring student achievement and organizational productivity” (p. 81). Standards include reinforcing the “whole-child” growth of all students and the professional growth of teachers, along with fostering a sense of community to maximize teaching and learning. Hoerr (2005) describes school culture as a clear sense of expectations to everyone about what is important, which includes how to teach students and how to interact with other adults. The culture of a school can range from toxic, to compliant, to dynamic and purposeful. Regardless of where a school lies within the range, school culture is a real and powerful determinant in school success.



Elements™ is a comprehensive solution for schools and districts designed to assist with multiple aspects related to student achievement and school processes. Student, family, and community involvement and support can be enhanced by Elements™ thru a variety of means. First, with the Data Portals element parents can be kept informed through a private and secure interface through the internet. This flexible utility allows parents to access grades, attendance, test scores, report cards, events, and a host of other features, thus keeping them informed and updated on their child’s progress. Additionally, the community can access information through a public portal and keep track of a school or districts progress. Secondly, thru the robust reporting and planning capabilities, stakeholders can analyze strengths and weaknesses, document strategies and plans to address needs, and receive real-time updates on progress.

Professional learning is a critical component for school success and with all four components of Elements™ schools can monitor this learning process and engage everyone in the progression of improvement. Standards and pacing can be developed and monitored through the curriculum component. Plans for teachers and students can be developed in collaborative settings to address needs and monitor performance. A variety of formative assessments can be given to ascertain student understanding. Ultimately, educators can analyze all results through Data Utilization to begin asking the right questions and formulating plans to meets the demands of students. When all components come together, it creates the perfect opportunity for collaboration and learning amongst all educators to learn and grow.

Many aspects influence the category of leadership. Training, personality, and experience, along with multiple other factors, determine the leadership style that educators



employ. However, factors that enhance leadership are data availability, understanding and utilization. Most good decisions begin with good data and through the Data Utilization component leaders have all the available curriculum, instruction and assessment data readily available to them. Elements'™ interface is easy to navigate and understand, allowing for leaders to quickly and easily locate the information they desire and comprehend it in a variety of ways. A true change agent seeks this type of information, utilizes it and leads others to utilize it, in order to be effective and impact student achievement.

School Culture is a broad and challenging concept to articulate, but educators understand its reality and influence upon all processes and procedures within a school. When all the aspects of Elements™ are combined with Thinkgate's consulting expertise, training program and comprehensive support, school systems have an invaluable solution to meet their needs. As districts, schools, teachers, students and parents begin to incorporate the components of Elements™ into their daily routine the culture will become one of engagement, collaboration, collegiality and community. As the culture changes, so does the achievement and success of all students.



## References

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