# Michigan Focus School Networked Improvement Community: Developing a Theory of Action

## November 17th, 2015

An important step in the continuous improvement process is developing a working theory of practice improvement. Reasonably, the Focus Networked Improvement Community (NIC) cannot address each of the root problems unearthed in the Root Cause Analysis meeting that took place on October 20, 2015. However, the Focus NIC can identify "a small but powerful set of drivers to initiative improvement," where *drivers* are key levers for improvement.[1] Developing a theory of action involves the following steps:

1. Identifying the outcomes that one or more strategies are intended to generate.
2. Describing the series of outputs (or changes) that should show progress toward impact.
3. Naming all of the activities needed to generate the outcomes (for each strategy).
4. Defining the inputs that link directly to the activities.

The Michigan Focus School NIC will develop a theory of action to address the following problem statement developed by the team during the October 20 meeting that guides our work:

***Focus Schools suffer from a lack of access to, understanding of, and use of data to implement, monitor, and evaluate continuous improvement on a daily basis.***

# Agenda

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|---|---|
| **1:00–1:10 p.m.** | **Introductions** |
| **1:10–1:15 p.m.** | **Review of Root Cause Analysis Meeting** |
| **1:15–2:30 p.m.** | **Activity 1 – Develop a Theory of Action** |
| **2:30–2:45 p.m.** | **Break** |
| **2:45–3:45 p.m.** | **Activity 2 – Write Measurable Aim Statements** |
| **3:45 –4:00 p.m.** | **Next Steps** |

[1] Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

# Activity 1: Develop a Theory of Action

**Goal:** Develop a working theory of action that can be used to guide the work of the Focus NIC for the remainder of the year that specifies inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

**Strategy:** Develop a logic model using the Knowlton & Phillips (2012) framework, which works from outcomes to outputs to inputs.[2]

## Step 1: Focus on Outcomes (20 minutes)

- Select the aim statement and primary driver, or key improvement lever, and (if needed) secondary driver on which the group will focus.
- Work with group members to answer the following questions:
  - Who are the program targets? Who will implement the changes suggested? Who will the changes ultimately affect?
  - What is the desired change?
  - What is the action that will achieve the stated goal?
  - What is the timeline for completion?
- Fill out the following table with your group members.

| Who is the target? | What is the desired change (action verb)? | In what (outcome)? | By when? |
|---|---|---|---|
| *e.g., Teachers* | *e.g., Increase* | *e.g., Formative data use skills* | *e.g., March 2016* |
| | | | |
| | | | |

- Are the program targets, hypotheses, desired outcomes, and timeline S.M.A.R.T.?
  - Specific?
  - Measurable?
  - Action oriented?
  - Realistic?
  - Timed?
- Once the group has come to a consensus, fill in the outcomes and targets in the theory of action template.

[2] Knowlton, L.W. & Phillips, C.C. (2012). *The Logic Model Guidebook: Better Strategies for Great Results, 2nd Ed.* SAGE Publications, Inc.: Thousand Oaks, CA.

## Step 2: Relate Activities to Outputs (20 minutes)

- Using the change ideas developed in Activity 1, write a series of If/Then statements that begin to connect activities to outputs.

  IF _____ THEN / IF _____

  THEN / IF _____ THEN / IF _____

  THEN / IF _____ THEN _____

  For example:

  1. IF we develop a series of college readiness workshops for parents, THEN we can recruit parents to participate in the workshops.
  2. IF we invite parents to participate in the workshops, THEN parents attend the workshops.
  3. IF parents attend workshops, THEN parents better understand the timelines and demands of the college application process.
  4. IF parents better understand the timelines and demands of the college application process, THEN parents help their students with the application process.
  5. IF parents help their students with the application process, THEN students meet financial aid and college application deadlines.

- Make sure the If/Then statements connect directly to the outcomes specified in Step 1 and are short and actionable.
- Using these If/Then statements, fill in the logic model template with activities and outputs that relate to the outcomes specified in Step 1.

## Step 3: Focus on Inputs (20 minutes)

- As a group, discuss what inputs are required in order for the activities to take place.
- The group should consider the following questions:
  - What resources are readily available?
  - What additional resources or supports are needed?
  - Is access to these resources or inputs realistic?
- Enter the discussed inputs into the logic model template.

## Step 4: Review the Theory of Action (15 minutes)

- In the larger group, discuss whether the theory of action that the group has developed:
  - Addresses the primary drivers and measurable aim specified in Activity 1?
  - Is feasible for the Focus NIC to implement?
  - Is measurable?

# Theory of Action Template

| **Program Inputs**<br>What are the resources, personnel, and objectives that will lead to the outputs and outcomes? | **Program Activities**<br>How will these resources, personnel, and objectives be deployed to students? | **Program Outputs**<br>What kinds of consequences will the activities have? What kinds of processes are set in motion? | **Outcomes**<br>How do the inputs, activities, and outputs relate to the ultimate desired outcomes? |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| **Program Targets:** Describe the type of student(s) and/or adult(s) that will be served by the program and how these individuals will be recruited. | | | |
| **Program Goal:** List the measurable aim(s) developed in Activity 1 here. | | | |

# Activity 2: Write Measurable Aim Statements

## Step 1: Identify a Measurable Improvement Aim (30 minutes)

- As a group, review the problem statement, the fishbone diagram outlining root causes, and the theory of action developed in Activity 1.
- In small groups, write out measurable aim statements. The aim statements should include:
    - A preset target population
    - A metric of interest
    - A change in a numerical value on the metric of interest
    - A timeline on which the change should occur

For example: To increase from 5 percent to 50 percent the number of students who achieve college math credit within one year of continuous enrollment.

- Present your aim(s) to the larger group. Discuss the pros and cons of each. Come to a consensus on the aim statement the group would like to use to drive its work.

## Step 2: Anticipate Unintended Consequences (30 minutes)

- As a group, ensure that the theory of action supports the measurable aim statement. Make changes as needed.
- Discuss challenges that may result at the classroom, school, district, intermediate school district, and state level. Keep track of these in the chart provided, with potential solutions or buffers against these challenges in the right hand column.

| **Classroom-Level Challenges** | |
|---|---|
| Challenge | Potential Solution(s) |
| | |
| **School-Level Challenges** | |
| Challenge | Potential Solution(s) |
| | |
| **District-Level Challenges** | |
| Challenge | Potential Solution(s) |
| | |
| **ISD-Level Challenges** | |
| Challenge | Potential Solution(s) |
| | |
| **State-Level Challenges** | |
| Challenge | Potential Solution(s) |
| | |

## Next Steps: Measuring and Tracking Outcomes (15 minutes)

Using the theory of action and measurable aims developed in this session, the Focus NIC will next turn its attention to defining outcome measures and developing formative metrics to ensure the Focus NIC can achieve the goals specified in this section. This meeting will take place on December 3, 2015. In anticipation of this meeting, consider the following questions:

- What metrics do you already collect that can be used to track inputs, outputs, and outcomes in the theory of action?
- What metrics would you like to use to collect to track inputs, outputs, and outcomes in the theory of action?