

A process for increasing school district efficiency and effectiveness

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The Center for Innovative School Leadership (CISL) conducts effectiveness and efficiency reviews for volunteer school districts. The goal of CISL is to identify best practices, cost savings, and potential effectiveness and efficiency strategies for school districts in the four protocol areas of facilities management, human resources, leadership, and teaching and learning. The identified best practices, cost-saving measures, and efficiency suggestions could be utilized by other districts for self-analysis of school operations.

Keywords: best practice, school improvement, third-party school district review, school district effectiveness, school district efficiency.

OVERVIEW

The review process used was initially developed in 2004 as a result of Kansas legislative action with Senate Bill 304. The bill created a “cooperative endeavor” among three Kansas universities: Emporia State, Fort Hays State and Pittsburg State. The bill called for the establishment of the Center for Innovative School Leadership (CISL) to provide the following to Kansas school districts:

- Consultation and assistance to improve administrative efficiency.
- Consultation and assistance for administrative evaluation and problem solving.
- Representatives from education, business and industry to serve as consultants to assist with recommended administrative improvements and efficiency issues.
- Cooperative or outsourcing arrangements for districts to improve administrative efficiency.
- Assistance for improving academic efficiencies.

The services are “upon the request of the district” and the implementation of any of the recommendations made to the school district is left up to the district. The law includes how the center may negotiate with school districts for the fees required for utilizing these services (Kansas Senate Bill, 2004).

Since the establishment of CISL, sponsored by The Jones Institute of Educational Excellence (JIEE) at Emporia State University, the Center has served 35 school districts and four special education cooperatives. Currently, the Center strives to conduct at least eight district reviews each year (W. Sailors, personal communication, August 12, 2010).

During this five-year period the review process has been improved through feedback from school districts and team members. A formal review was conducted by an outside

consultant in the summer of 2009. A copy of that document is available from the JIEE (Hernandez, 2009).

REVIEW FOCUS AREAS

The review process focuses in four protocol areas. One area is Facilities Management. School facilities and maintenance of those facilities are vital for creating a safe and healthy learning environment. Many aspects of facilities management are analyzed including organizational structure, custodial operations, transportation, building and ground maintenance, energy efficiency, planning-facility usage, and safety and security (Sailors, 2009 pp. 16-18).

A second protocol is Human Resources. School districts are only as effective as their employees. The human resource protocol examines various aspects of hiring, evaluation, recruitment, retention, job descriptions, salary, benefits, and supervision (Sailors, 2009 pp. 10-12).

Leadership is another important area that is the focus of a review protocol. A district’s structure, staff management, and planning process create the foundation for effective and efficient education of students. This protocol examines various leadership groups including the board of education, school district level administration, individual school building administration, and parent-teacher associations. Also included are legal services, district organization and management, and communication (Sailors, 2009 pp. 13-15).

Student learning is the most important aspect of school district efficiency and effectiveness and is the focus of the Teaching and Learning protocol. School districts must provide high quality educational services. This protocol identifies best practices to support student learning in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, technology, special education, extracurricular activities, and staffing (Sailors, 2009 pp. 19-22).

THE REVIEW TEAM

Team members are a vital part of the review process as they are required to evaluate district-provided information, validate the accuracy, and determine its significance. Team members also perform interviews, conduct focus groups, and make observations during an on-site visit. After the visit, team members organize their findings in a written report that includes recommendations and the anticipated impact of each recommendation (W. Sailors, personal communication, December 16, 2009).

CISL recruits teams of professionals from business, civic, and school environments to ensure multiple perspectives are considered. Team members in the areas of Facilities Management, Leadership, and Human Resources are recruited exclusively from experts outside of the K-12 education field. Respected K-12 educators are utilized in the Teaching and Learning protocol (CISL 2005). Care is taken to insure that these K-12 educators do not have personal connections to the district being reviewed. By combining the skills of civic leaders, business professionals, educators, and other authorities, CISL is able to build a qualified and objective team that serves the district in an objective professional manner (Sailors, 2009 pp. 3-4).

DATA COLLECTION

During the initial phase of the review process, the district submits informational documents to CISL. These materials correspond to each of the four protocol areas. They provide pertinent background information and serve to better educate team members about the inner workings of the district (CISL 2005).

Climate surveys are also conducted during the initial phase of the review process. CISL created these surveys to identify public perceptions and attitudes toward the respective district. Surveys are distributed to a total of five groups: administrators/board of education members, teachers, classified staff, parents/patrons, and students. These surveys are administered electronically and allow participants easy access to the information (Sailors, 2009 p. 5).

CISL gathers and organizes comparative data for the school district. Schools being reviewed are compared to peer schools, region schools, and state averages. Peer schools are selected based on their similar size to the reviewed district, comparable socio-economic status, and similar or better assessment results. Four peer schools are selected for each reviewed district. Region schools include all districts in the contiguous counties around the reviewed school district (Sailors, 2009 p. 5).

The comparative data gathered include the following: demographics, median income, enrollment trends, student-teacher ratios, special needs index, reading and math proficiency, average teacher salary, base teacher salary, twenty-year teacher salary trends, average classified staff salary, average sponsorship salary, average head coach salary, average principal salary, administrative staff ratios, operating expenditures, and mill levy rates and assessed valuations (Sailors, 2009 p. 6).

These documents are provided to the team several weeks prior to the visit. Team members review the materials, request any needed information, and build a valuable knowledge base in regard to the district prior to the on-site visit (W. Sailors, personal communication, December 16, 2009).

The on-site review with the school district is scheduled approximately two months into the process. CISL allots two to three days for the on-site review, depending on the size of the district. Team members interview selected groups including teachers, administrators, classified staff, parents, central office staff, and board of education members. These interviews allow the team to gather information by asking pertinent questions and observing activities significant to each protocol area (W. Sailors, personal communication, December 16, 2009).

REPORTING

When the review process is completed, the individual team members compose their report using a CISL-developed protocol. Telephone and face-to-face conferencing are utilized as necessary by the team as the written report is finalized. Triangulated data sources, member checks, and peer reviews are utilized as quality checks during the report development phase. The CISL staff collects the individual team member reports and produces an executive summary and a preliminary comprehensive report. A meeting with the board of education is conducted. During this meeting the executive summary that has been developed by CISL is distributed to the board of education and superintendent. The executive summary is composed of the district profile, highlights of the team member reports, commendations, recommendations for improvement, the impact of those recommendations, and highlights of the surveys. The superintendent and board of education members are encouraged to ask clarifying questions in regard to the executive summary (Sailors, 2009 pp. 6-8).

Approximately one month after the executive summary has been distributed, a full report is sent to the superintendent. A hard copy and an electronic version are included. The full report consists of the executive summary, complete team member reports, all survey results, and comparative data collected on the reviewed school district (CISL 2005).

FOLLOW-UP REVIEW

In an effort to expand and improve services, the Center for Innovative School Leadership conducts follow-up reviews with participating school districts. The first follow-up review happens approximately two weeks after the on-site review, when a CISL representative contacts the district at an agreed-upon time. The representative interviews selected district personnel about their perceptions of the CISL school review process (Hernandez, 2009).

Another follow-up review occurs approximately six months after the on-site review. A CISL representative contacts the district via phone, email, or personal visit and asks follow-up questions to determine how the district has implemented suggestions from the review process. The district discusses with the representative the impact of these changes on such areas as student learning and cost savings. It also describes the benefits of the CISL review process as well as their suggestions for future improvements (Hernandez, 2009).

A telephone conference call by an independent contractor is used as an additional evaluation tool after the initial CISL visit. This communication is used to obtain first impressions from the focus group participants. For example, a first impression comment from a parent participant conveyed that parents appreciated the thoroughness of the process and the professionalism of those conducting the focus groups. Teachers have indicated that they generally have been impressed with the focus on student learning. One fifth-grade teacher reported, "I was so pleased to find out that a main focus of the visit was on how to improve student learning in our district. I was impressed by the expertise and varied experience of the visiting team members. It was particularly refreshing to have team members from outside of education." Often the conference call participants who are required to do a lot of work to provide the visiting team members with volumes of documents may be skeptical of the benefit and necessity of their contributions. However, often from this group comments such as, "It was evident in the visit that the team had studied the documents provided and used the background knowledge to guide their focus group questions" temper some of the initial uncertainty (J. Collins, personal communication, August 18, 2010).

A six-month telephone call to the superintendent and a one-year follow-up survey also are used to gain data on each visit. According to W. Sailors (personal communication, August 26, 2010) the following quotes are representative of the positive responses obtained from these follow-up activities:

Superintendent: "The time our district invested in the CISL effectiveness and efficiency review was time well

spent. I believe in the process and feel that it gave our district the momentum to take on long range planning."

Superintendent: "The review provided our district with a guide for planning. We are a growing district due to the growth of the nearby Fort Riley Army Base. As a result, we are confronted with some unique planning issues. I appreciate the team for providing their services. We have already implemented some of their recommendations."

Clay County Superintendent: "I would highly recommend the efficiency review process conducted by the Center for Innovative School Leadership team. The process itself was very thorough, in depth, and was detailed in nature. It has provided our district with a great deal of information to be studied. I believe (CISL) will help the district become more efficient and allocate resources directly related to student achievement and learning."

School Board President: "I appreciate the expert advice that was delivered in an advisory manner. As board members we now have at our fingertips a wealth of information that we can use as we see best to improve our school district."

Teacher: "We used the information as a means to identify best practices in teaching and learning that were already taking place in our district. As a teacher leader I was afraid that the report would just identify areas to reduce expenses with little regard to the potential negative effects on student learning. I was pleased to learn that my fears were misplaced, and I am excited about working with the board and administration on using the report as a spring board to improve the excellent teaching and learning programs that have already been initiated in the district."

Teacher: "I appreciated being included in the focus groups conducted during the team's onsite visit. After reading the completed report it was evident that information provided by the focus group was used in a positive way."

School Board President: "The report was used as a seminal piece of information in our successful capital bond campaign."

If the school district would like further assistance, CISL aids the district in selecting items for implementation. CISL representatives offer training on prioritization techniques such as the Q-sort. This technique helps groups quickly and efficiently to rank items according to their importance. After prioritizing the recommendations, districts have greater direction regarding where to focus their efforts (CISL 2005).

CONCLUSION

The Center for Innovative School Leadership model offers a viable approach in helping school districts become more effective and efficient in providing quality education in a cost efficient manner. The model provides a comprehensive objective evaluation of school district operations. It provides findings from multiple sources, best-practice recommendations based on the findings, and the anticipated impacts of each recommendation. The final report may be used as a framework for district strategic planning and goal setting. For more information, copies of reports, and survey forms, contact Bill Sailors, Director, 620-341-5823 <www.emporia.edu/cisl or wsailors@emporia.edu>.

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