

Learning Organization Framework

Office of Teaching, Learning, and Technology



Introduction

This document outlines a framework for considering Bay City Public Schools as a learning organization. Unlike an organization that fosters or supports learning – all school systems do those things – a “learning organization” is one where **every individual and team is committed to their own learning and the learning of the organization as a whole.**

“Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life”

— Peter M. Senge

Our vision for the future

Embedded within the mission of Bay City Public Schools are **three strong grade-level vision statements** for student success:

- Every elementary student will demonstrate a **strong academic foundation.**
- Every middle school student will possess the **essential tools for growth.**
- Every high school student will **excel and own their future.**

The wonderful thing about vision statements is that they are **big, ambitious, and worth achieving.** If we are honest with ourselves, it is unlikely that we will see these statements come true in our lifetimes, but **what if we came close?** What if we spent the rest of our careers working toward these three goals and got a little closer to each one every year? We’d have a remarkable story about how a group of committed educators came together to help more kids succeed in critical ways. **This is why we work in schools!**

Organizations that Learn

If we are to realize our vision for the future, then **we must commit ourselves to learning how to do the work.** Because if we had all the answers now, we’d be doing what needed to be done already, and our vision would be our reality! Yet, it is not. As long as we still have students in schools who lack a solid academic foundation, are missing needed tools for growth, and not excelling and owning their future, then **we will always have something to learn.**

Growth Mindset & Grit

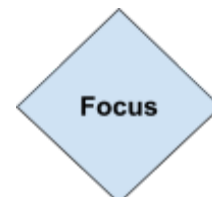
Education is much like baseball because failure occurs much more frequently than success. That’s simply the nature of the game. Yet every at-bat is a new opportunity to hit the ball. Every pitch is a new opportunity to strike the batter out. To be good at baseball or in education, **we have to have a very short-term memory for failure** so that we can **remain optimistic about our next opportunity to succeed.**

The Framework

The basic framework of a learning organization is straightforward and should look familiar to most as it aligns with most school improvement frameworks in its parts. However, it differs because it is a **cyclical framework** of continuous improvement, whereas most school improvement frameworks are linear and imply a beginning and an end.

Finding Focus

At the center of the Learning Organization Framework is a **very specific single thing about student learning** that the team or organization thinks is essential to move us closer to our vision for success. For schools, a common question to ask when trying to find focus is, “What knowledge, skill, or way of being do our students need to gain now for them **to achieve our collective vision for their future?**”



Focus should be placed on an area where the **teachers and leaders** within the organization currently feel **they** lack skills in answering without further learning. Ensuring an area of focus lies outside a team’s current area of expertise or comfort level protects the organization from setting expectations for learning too low.

Cycles of Inquiry

Once a focus has been identified, how a team organizes its learning is through tight cycles of inquiry. These cycles occur in three steps:

1. **Looking at Data** - What is the data that is relevant to this particular area of focus, and how does that data shape your understanding of the challenge?
2. **Drafting of Analysis** - What analysis or insight emerges as you examine that data, and how does that analysis inform your intended strategies to move toward your area of focus?
3. **Implementing a Strategy** - Based on your data analysis, what will you attempt or try?



Of course, an attempted strategy creates a new set of data **that starts the cycle over again**. Successful teams within learning organizations **repeatedly cycle their learning** in relation to areas of focus.

An Example

Let’s assume a school chose an area of focus around improving the quality of student writing. The first step they would take is to collect the relevant data. In this case, the most useful relevant data would not be found in standardized tests but in samples of student writing. They would decide on a process or protocol to help them analyze that data and then look for trends across samples to identify student learning and performance patterns.

Based on their emergent understanding, which they would record in writing, they would select or identify a specific strategy that they believe would help them get traction on the specific area of student writing they are trying to address. They would quickly implement that strategy in their classrooms, and, just as quickly, they would bring new samples of student writing that came out of that strategy back to the table to repeat the cycle all over again.

Characteristics that Impact Learning

Surrounding the Cycle of Inquiry are characteristics that can either **accelerate** or **impede** an organization from getting better over time.

Culture represents the foundational element of the Learning Organization Framework because it is **the most critical aspect of an organization in terms of its ability to improve**. Culture is paramount because of its impact on how teachers and school leaders think, feel, and behave within the organization. Engaging in critical feedback, sharing concerns, and reflecting on work requires significant trust and support to work effectively.



Structure represents the second key element impacting an organization's ability to learn. Often when schools set about the improvement process, they realize that **the organization's structure gets in the way of their efforts**. Using our example from above, the teachers trying to improve student writing will have difficulty if their only collaborative time is one hour each month after school. Examining student work or other data in such limited or spaced amounts of time becomes challenging. Leaders must think about how they structure collaborative time so that learning can occur.

Leadership is the final characteristic within the framework that impacts student learning. If Bay City Public Schools is to become a learning organization, then **we must all share responsibility for the outcomes we produce**. We must also encourage independent judgment and cultivate leadership in others if we are to progress.

Starting with Focus

In conclusion, it's crucial to understand that any meaningful effort to improve begins with **clearly focusing on something you want to change in student learning**. Although it's tempting to start on the outside of the framework by thinking about what you'd like to change about school culture, structure, or leadership, that usually just leads to more conversations about culture, structure, or leadership, and you never really get around to talking about student learning. To be successful, we have to trust that meaningful improvements in student outcomes will come from our commitment to our focus and tight cycles of inquiry.

The "Cycle of Inquiry" was created by the New Tech Network and is freely available [on their website](#).