

# Strategic Improvement That Focuses on Student Achievement

Bethel School District found a process for strategic improvement that ensures success for all students.

When Kent Hunsaker took over as superintendent of the Bethel School District near Eugene, Oregon, four years ago, he found a district without a mission, without a vision, and without an articulated belief system to guide its staff and students. He also found a community eager for change in its school system, which serves nearly 4,000 students in grades K-12. The way to get things done, many told Hunsaker, was to "tell people what to do."

But Hunsaker did not embrace the authoritarian model. "It's certainly a way to get things done *quickly*," he notes, "but it's not the way to get things done *well*."

Hunsaker and his staff opted to get things done well—they embarked on a journey of strategic planning and improvement toward a destination of improved student outcomes and increased productivity. Under Hunsaker's leadership, the Bethel School District became one of the pilot sites, along with other school districts in Montana, Oregon, and Washington, for "Creating the Future" (CTF), a research-based, district-level strategic improvement process developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, Oregon.



*Photograph courtesy of Bethel School District, Oregon*

*Second-grade teacher Elaine Pruett, a member of the Bethel School District's "Creating the Future" leadership team, shares a moment with students at Clear Lake Elementary School*

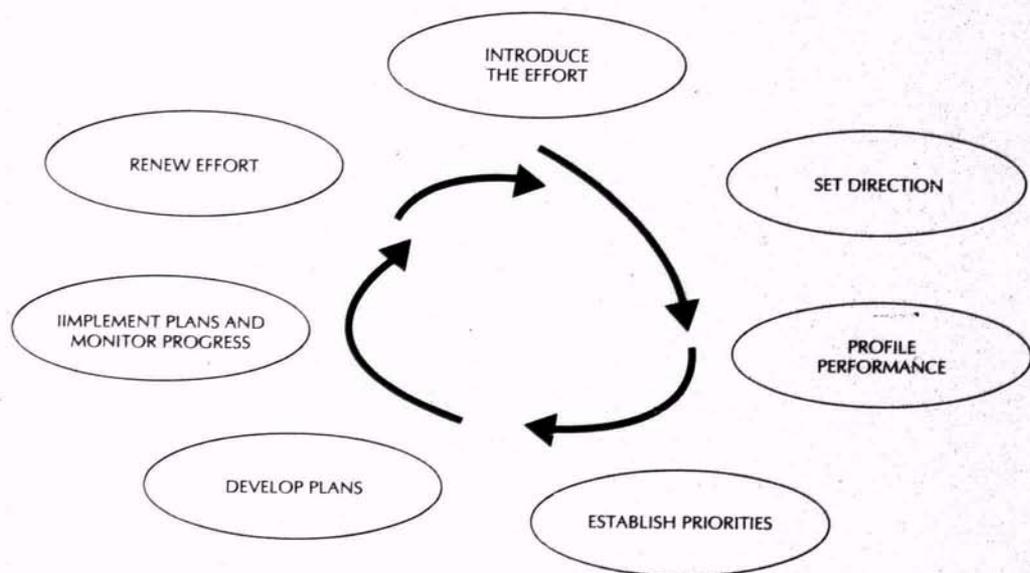
## The Key to Creating the Future

The idea behind strategic improvement is to bring the entire school district to focus on student learning and improved student outcomes. It's much more than strategic planning. It means ensuring learning success for all students.

"Strategic planning is essential, but

it is not sufficient to cause lasting changes in school districts," says Thomas A. Olson, Director of the Professional Development Program at NWREL. "The training and technical assistance service provided in Creating the Future includes the teaching and learning of all steps in an improvement process rather than strategic planning alone."

Fig. 1. District Level Strategic Improvement Process



The Creating the Future process brings focus to direct level strategic improvement efforts. All efforts are aimed at improving results for students. Priorities redirect resources and energy toward important outcomes and provide the basis for discontinuing some programs and activities.

Creating the Future strives for improved outcomes of schooling for all children, including those youngsters who are at risk of educational failure, dropping out, or just barely getting by in school. CTF is an outgrowth of the highly successful "Onward to Excellence" (OTE) program developed by NWREL nearly 10 years ago. OTE, also research-based, involves teachers and principals in setting goals for long-term change in their local schools. Adopted by more than 600 schools, Onward to Excellence is a cyclical process, a method whose final step is not an ending, but renewal.

After nearly 10 years' experience with OTE, we sensed that a similar type of planning at the district level would be useful. We developed CTF to involve the stakeholders in the system—classroom teachers, students, school admin-

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istrators, classified personnel, school board members, local merchants, central office administrators, and community representatives—in an ongoing process aimed at improving student outcomes. Now CTF can accomplish at

the district level what OTE does at the schoolhouse level.

CTF helps to emphasize districtwide responsibilities for student success in addition to the responsibilities at each school (see fig. 1).

#### **Promoting Lasting Change**

The focus on productivity and achievement sets CTF apart from other strategic planning efforts. The purpose of Creating the Future is to establish a process in school districts that can be used again and again to improve the outcomes of schooling for all children and youth. The intent is to promote substantial, lasting change in the way school districts go about improving and renewing themselves. We expect districts engaging in the process to achieve deep cultural and structural changes over time.

CTF accomplishes its mission by concentrating on several key elements, including:

- A focus on student performance. The district planners are able to specify values and beliefs, a vision of excellence, a mission, and general student learning goals through direction-setting activities that enlist the efforts of school staff, community members, school board members, and others. This direction-setting process helps clarify what students are to learn and influences

curriculum, instruction, staff development, and assessment.

- Both a strategic improvement and a strategic planning process. To begin with, the district teams initiate planning processes, including direction setting, profiling, priority setting, and action planning. Subsequently, these efforts are supported by implementing planned improvement activities, monitoring progress and troubleshooting, and evaluating and renewing their efforts.

- Collegial action to ensure success

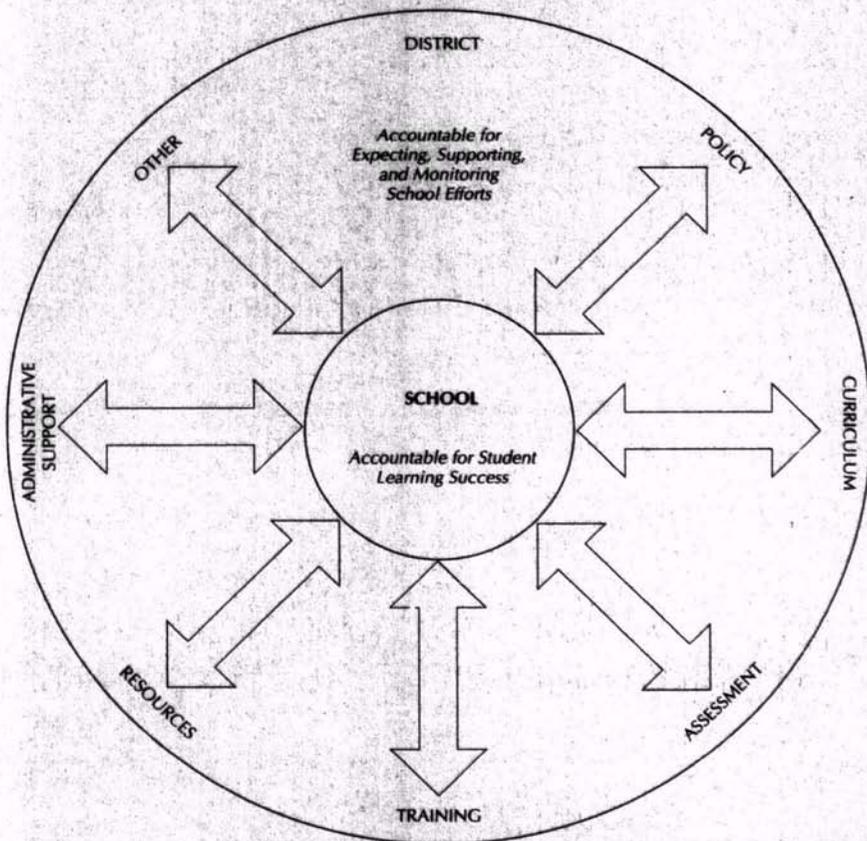
in learning for all children and youth.

- A data-driven process. Each district team develops a local profile, including information on student performance, district and community characteristics, and ongoing improvement activities.

- A research and theory base in areas that include change in education, professional development, and adult learning.

Not surprisingly, central office support enhances improvements at the

**Fig. 2. District—School Responsibilities**



Schools become increasingly accountable for results while districts develop the support systems essential for schools to achieve learning success for all of the students they serve.

school level. As NWREL's *Effective Schooling Practices* (1990) states, "The district creates an environment in which the pursuit of instructional effectiveness is valued. Clear and stable policies, expectations for improvement, and strong systems of support—all help schools become more effective."

Districts are accountable for expecting, supporting, and monitoring school efforts; and schools are accountable for their results (see fig. 2). As Olson asserts, "Schools are a lot more effective where the central offices have their act together."

### Developing Leadership

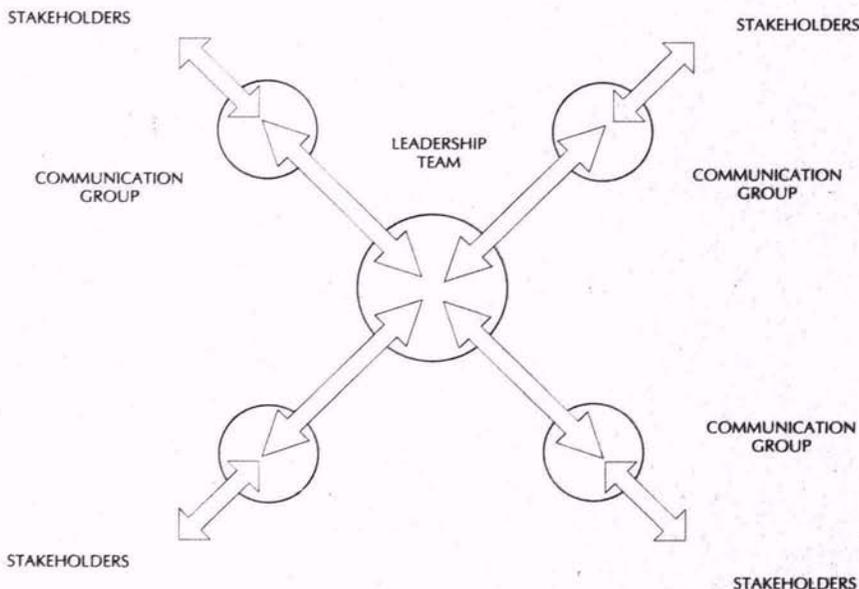
Creating the Future requires six training sessions over a two-year period. Each formal training session includes a mix of cooperative learning activities and exercises for developing guidelines and goals for future improvement.

A leadership team of 10 to 15 members guides the local improvement effort and is responsible for communicating with various stakeholders in the community (see fig. 3). In the Bethel School District, for example, the leadership team members worked with about 70 other people, half of them

community members, in establishing a statement of values and beliefs, a vision for the future, and student learning goals. The communications groups also help set priorities for improvement, support implementation efforts, and monitor progress.

The student learning goals are crucial in the development of all other improvement efforts. These are global goals that the district and community believe their students should master by the time they graduate. For example, the Salem-Keizer School District, which serves about 27,000 students in

Fig. 3. Structure for Involvement



Formal structures for continuous, meaningful involvement of all "stakeholder groups" are critical to the success of strategic improvement efforts.

Oregon's central Willamette Valley, is another pilot site for CTF. There, the goals include (1) challenging all students to develop lifelong learning skills in communication, critical thinking/problem solving, human relations, personal development, self-concept, and citizenship and (2) developing an understanding of and involvement in cross-cultural, global, and environmental relationships.

Once the student learning goals are established, a profile of student performance can be developed, and methods of measuring student progress in achieving the goals can be adopted. All district activities, from curriculum development to staff training to assessment, can then be designed to support the student learning goals and improve student performance.

Like OTE, CTF provides an ongoing process of improvement and renewal. The initial three-year commitment provides a district with a framework for improvement, a set of student learning goals, a method to achieve goals, and a plan to evaluate them. The process is then renewed, revised, improved, and strengthened.

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CTF provokes thoughtful deliberation and frequent communication among various stakeholders in the community. Of course, frequent two-way communication is time-consuming. In the rush to improve, it is much easier to just move ahead, thinking that people will come along. They won't. Thought and energy are necessary to bring people along, and

improvement efforts gain strength as broad discussions bring out beliefs, values, and ideas from stakeholders. Bringing people together to achieve important priorities through consensus development and collaborative activity is the heart of improvement work.

#### **Bethel's Journey**

Bethel's journey was filled with bumps and potholes: a breakdown in contract negotiations led to a strike by teachers that jarred the community and strained efforts to strategically plan for the future, and financial problems have plagued the district. But in 1989 voters approved a \$12 million tax base as well as a capital improvement bond. And the emotional fractures left over from the strike have begun to heal.

One of the first things the district did as part of the CTF process was to develop a profile of student performance and other data to provide a framework for future activities. "We found some pretty mediocre stuff," Hunsaker admits. "We were pretty much at national norms in most areas. But we have a belief system that says we're better than that. The question then became *How do we go about getting better?*"

An eight-person leadership team (including the superintendent, two board members, the curriculum director, two teachers, a teacher's aide, and a principal) guided the community through a process of analyzing the data in the profile and setting priorities for improvement. With a great deal of input from all key stakeholders, the team decided that the best way to improve the district was to concentrate on improving each school. "We feel very strongly about the autonomy of our schools," Hunsaker says. "We want all our people to participate in school improvement."

As a result of that philosophy, Bethel adopted a districtwide goal that reaches to the grass roots for improvement. Within three years, each of Bethel's eight schools will develop profiles of their communities, define student learning goals, and create programs to achieve them; then monitor progress, suggest areas for improvement, and reinforce strengths.

## **Districts involved in strategic improvement should be prepared to spend time and effort on the task.**

Districts involved in strategic improvement should be prepared to spend time and effort on the task. "In education, we expect things to take place on a 9-month cycle," says Hunsaker. "As long as we look at things that way, we'll never accomplish anything of meaning. With Creating the Future, we'll be measuring our success at 18 months or, perhaps, 24 months. We'll look at test scores, discipline, grades, attendance records, student attitudes, and many other measures to check our progress. Then we'll plan for further improvements."

Hunsaker is confident that Bethel's efforts will produce positive results. "I'm a believer in the whole idea," he notes. "If we've focused on student performance and involved people in the process, I'm confident we'll succeed." □

*Authors' note:* Portions of this material appeared in an article in the January 1991 issue of *The Northwest Report*, a regular publication of NWREL.

Several districts in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska have contracted with NWREL for CTF. NWREL will be assessing the impacts of CTF on student outcomes, staff perception and support, and the like.

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