

## Using a personal theory of action as a basis for district improvement<sup>1</sup>

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April, 2016

While there are many different views and versions of theories of action (see inset), many versions converge on two relatively simple ideas:

1. The actions of individuals and groups reflect beliefs and assumptions – theories that are often implicit and unarticulated – about how particular goals and purposes can be achieved
2. By making tacit beliefs, assumptions and theories explicit, leaders can develop a set of testable hypotheses that can help all members of an organization to understand both what they are supposed to be doing and why they are supposed to be doing it

Theories of action, however, are deceptively complicated as any one organization may reflect a number of different initiatives, groups, and individuals, all of whom may have somewhat different hypotheses about what the key goals should be and how they should be achieved. Educators, in particular, often have very different, and deeply held, ideas about how people learn, how schools should be organized, how schools can be improved, and what role schools should play in society. All of these different perspectives can make developing a common theory of action difficult.

### 3 Different Approaches to TOA's

- McAdams (2006) describes how to embed theories of action (such as managed instruction; empowerment) in board policy
- City, Elmore, and their colleagues (2009) describe how TOA's are explicit if/then statements that can be used to reflect on and advance work on the instructional core
- Weiss (1995) and Cuban (2010) describe how TOA's can be used to help surface implicit assumptions and identify gaps in plans/strategies

To manage this complexity, education leaders can develop their own personal theories of action that make visible their own beliefs, values and hypotheses about how their activities and decisions as a leader can have an impact on teaching and learning for all students. As Robert Peterkin, former Director of the Urban Superintendents Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education explains it, a personal theory of action is:

*The leader's distillation of possible strategies into a simple and coherent expression of the most essential aspects of how, why, with whom, when, where and with what expected results he or she will specifically and strategically engage in leadership practices to improve teaching and learning. It is the leader's understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship between his or her leadership intentions and practices and improvements in teaching and learning.*

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<sup>1</sup> Cite as Hatch, T. (2016). Using a personal theory of action as a basis for district improvement. New York City: NCREST

Regularly reflecting on a personal theory of action engages education leaders in the kind of double loop learning that enables them to examine their basic assumptions about how to improve teaching and learning and to rethink and refine their approach.

While individual leaders can develop and learn from their theories of action on their own, working with their district colleagues or other peers, mentors or friends can increase the power of a personal theory of action in a number of ways. Sharing a personal theory of action:

- Requires leaders to be succinct and clear – boiling down what often start as long laundry lists of goals and strategies to a few key priorities
- Provides opportunities to get the kind of feedback that can prevent reinventing the wheel – they can get advice and support that helps them build on what others have learned and zero in on the key issues and questions in their context
- Helps leaders to make sure that the major thrusts of work in their schools and districts matches their personal beliefs and convictions.
- Creates connections and strengthens that relationships that undergird collaborative work

In turn, sharing a personal theory of action establishes a model and a foundation for the development of an “organizational” or “district” theory of action that can help everyone to stay focused on key goals and priorities and to distribute responsibilities and coordinate work to help meet them.

### ***The origins of theories of action***

*The emphasis on theories of action grows out of the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1978), who highlighted the difference between single loop and double loop learning. From their perspective, learning involves identifying errors and making adjustments. But single loop learning reflects the kinds of corrections made by a thermostat – if the temperature is hotter than the target, then the heat is turned off; if it's too cold, then the heat is turned on. Thus, like a game of “hotter -colder”, single-loop learning can help to make behavior and practices more efficient and can help lead an individual or organization to a particular goal.*

*Double loop learning, however, involves gathering information that makes it possible to reflect on goals and assumptions and the way problems are framed, not just on whether or not given goals are being reached or problems solved. Double loop learning is particularly important because of what Argyris and Schön describe as the difference between what they call “espoused theories” – the assumptions and beliefs people say they value – and the “theories in use” – the assumptions and beliefs reflected in what people actually do. By articulating explicit theories of action and reflecting on how those theories play out in practice, Argyris and Schön argue that individuals and organizations can align their assumptions and actions and streamline their strategies. Further, articulating and reflecting on theories of action also makes it possible to question taken-for-granted assumptions and spur the rethinking and reframing needed to solve complex problems.*

### **Theories of action in the New Jersey Network of Superintendents**

The New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS) is a network of districts dedicated to improving outcomes for all students and makes developing and reflecting on a personal theory of action a central support for leadership development. Launched in

2008, the network engages an evolving roster of superintendents, ranging from 12 to 16 a year, with some having participated for as many as eight years. A design team led by the Executive Director of the Panasonic Foundation, Larry Leverett, convenes and facilitates network activities. Primary activities include a day-long meeting, once a month during the academic year. Roughly every other month, the meeting involves a visit to a participating district to conduct instructional – classroom observations focused on a “problem of practice” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). On alternating months, the meetings include activities designed to help superintendents examine and pursue specific issues of equity in their districts. As part of that work, superintendents regularly share their personal and district theories of action about how they expect to improve instruction district-wide, discuss their progress with one another, and get feedback.

As they reflect on how to use their theory of action as a basis for the collective work of their leadership teams and the district as a whole, however, network members often struggle with two key challenges: developing theories of action that are both comprehensive and focused and, in the process, figuring out how to both stay true to their beliefs and convictions while remaining open to learning and adapting their plans and strategies to the local context. Thus, on the one hand, leaders need to be clear, succinct, and consistent; providing a roadmap to navigate the overwhelming number and variety of issues and complexities of systemic improvement. On the other hand, they have to address and guide the work of people and groups who have very different responsibilities, who face different problems, in different and, often changing, conditions.

The efforts of one of the members of the network, superintendent of the Passaic Public Schools Pablo Muñoz, illustrates one approach to using theories of action as a basis for district leadership. That approach includes Muñoz’s efforts to develop his own personal theory of action, to use it to guide and reflect on his work as an educational leader and to communicate and focus on key strategic priorities. His personal theory of action also serves as the basis for work with his colleagues and the school board to develop a district theory of action expressed in a set of approved board policies. Muñoz also works with his colleagues to use that district theory of action as a strategic instrument to identify high-leverage goals and initiatives that can catalyze work across the district.

### **Forging a personal theory of action**

Muñoz joined the New Jersey Network at its inception in 2008, while he was superintendent in Elizabeth, a mid-sized, urban district with more than 30 schools and around 24,000 students. Muñoz had spent much of his career in the district as a teacher and then Assistant Superintendent before becoming Superintendent in 2005. Up until becoming superintendent, as Muñoz put it, he had a theory of action but he didn’t even know it. Both the implicit nature of his theory of action – and its limits – became clear to Muñoz when he joined the Broad Academy for Education Leaders. At the Broad Academy, he was introduced to the work of Don McAdams, a former school board member in Houston and founder of the Center for Reform of School Systems. McAdams outlines several different kinds of theories of action that superintendents can draw from, including what he calls “managed instruction.” That theory suggests that a district can improve instruction district-wide by establishing a common curriculum across all schools, providing high quality instructional materials, and developing

aligned assessments and related professional development. Muñoz felt that this approach fit well with work that he was doing in Elizabeth which included trying to improve what had been a highly decentralized system where teachers and schools were using many different curricula and instructional materials of variable quality. At the same time, he also realized, that the work he had been doing suggested that “if only we have a more consistent curriculum across grades and levels and the materials to support that curriculum then our students will be more successful.” As he explained “So we introduced algebra 1 and introduced new curriculum, but we weren’t paying enough attention to professional development, summative and formative assessments and other elements central to a managed instruction.” In response, Muñoz built on McAdam’s approach and worked with the Elizabeth school board to pass a policy adopting key elements of managed instruction as their district theory of action.

Muñoz’s views of managed instruction and theories of action continued to evolve as he worked with colleagues both inside and outside the district. Inside the district, her relied on colleagues like Olivia Herron, who had worked closely with him for years on developing district-wide curricula, and whom he promoted to take his former position as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum. Muñoz also drew on the work of Raina Sands, a former teacher in the district, who had gone to get her Masters degree. Upon her return to the district, she helped Muñoz to see the crucial role of professional development in the district’s work. At the same time, the members of the Panasonic Foundation who partnered with Elizabeth prompted further unpacking of the districts’ theory of action. “They said, ‘it’s great you have this district theory of action,’ Muñoz recalled, “but where is it in your practice?”

As one means to help think through what might be needed to bring the theory of action to life, in 2008, Muñoz’s colleagues from Panasonic also introduced him to the work of Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore and their colleagues (City et. al., 2009). That work uses theories of action and instructional rounds to emphasize that significant improvements in student learning depend on addressing the “instructional core” – the relationship between the content, teachers, and students – not just improving curriculum. As Muñoz explained, he’s learned that “everything begins and ends with the instructional core... you can have the best curriculum and materials in the world, but if you’re not thinking about the development of teachers, and the students’ engagement with the content, you’re not going to get anywhere.

The subsequent implementation of instructional rounds in Elizabeth and the growing attention to the instructional core also highlighted for Muñoz that a rigid focus on pacing could lead to the mistaken assumption that *if* curriculum was implemented “correctly” or pacing guides followed *then* all students’ learning would necessarily improve. As a consequence, Muñoz further expanded his focus to emphasize that improving instruction depends on teacher and leadership preparation *and* professional development *and* student engagement, not just high-quality materials. Muñoz also adjusted his approach to managed instruction further as a result of a meeting with staff from Aldine Texas (a district hailed for its effectiveness and for serving as a model for the “managed instruction” theory of action). From that meeting, Muñoz learned that the district practiced what he called “managed instruction with a wink” – focusing on alignment and consistency but allowing some flexibility for principals and schools who have demonstrated their effectiveness.

After joining the New Jersey Network of Superintendents in 2008, Muñoz was also asked to develop a “personal theory of action” that led him to reflect on his reading of literature on leadership and management and his own experiences (see Appendix 1 for William’s recommended readings for school and district leaders). That personal theory of action highlighted his focus on vision and mission, his belief in the power of leaders, and his expanded view of managed instruction (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Muñoz’s Personal Theory of Action in Elizabeth**

If I lead with a focus on three items:

1. Keeping the school system focused on its vision and mission in an effort to produce excellent results
2. Selecting effective leaders to carry out the mission
3. Getting the resources into the classroom

If I select leaders that focus on six items:

1. Vision
2. Mission
3. Increasing student learning and achievement by improving the instructional core
4. Teamwork
5. Trust
6. Loyalty

If I get the school system to commit to Managed Instruction by:

1. Creating and implementing an aligned, coherent, and detailed curriculum
2. Providing a world-class workforce of effective teachers and leaders
3. Providing a comprehensive professional development system which includes instructional coaches
4. Providing frequent formative and summative assessments
5. Providing a comprehensive student information system
6. Providing interventions for students and teachers
7. Measuring performance and applying pre-determined consequences

If I get the school system to commit to the 3 L's guiding principles:

1. Love
2. Laser-like focus on teaching and learning
3. Leadership

Then our students will graduate prepared to pursue a postsecondary education; will think, learn, achieve, and care; and will receive high pay in the 21st Century marketplace.

Over time, Muñoz began to share his personal theory of action, first with his Assistant Superintendents and then with his principals. In the process, sharing and discussing personal theories of action became a part of his work to develop a leadership team that shared his commitment to the instructional core and had the skills and expertise to put

the district theory of action into practice. (For more on Muñoz's work in Elizabeth see Hatch & Roegman, 2012).

While working with these and other colleagues during the latter half of his eight years as superintendent in Elizabeth, the district showed notable improvements in test scores across grade levels, increased the number of students taking AP courses and passing AP exams, and established a new district high school that became one of the top-performing schools in the state. Nonetheless, the school board, which had consistently backed Muñoz, became embroiled in political battles with powerful local politicians. Frustrated by the battles and legal proceedings that he felt were preventing him from pursuing his vision, Muñoz decided it was time to leave Elizabeth, and, in 2013, he took a job in Passaic, a similar district in a nearby community.

### **It's never too early to start with a theory**

*"Go and spread the gospel, and, if you have to, use words"* – Roberto Muñoz quoting the former head of Facilities in Elizabeth (paraphrasing St. Francis of Assisi)

Muñoz took advantage of the transition to apply what he'd learned about theories of action over the years in Elizabeth to his work in Passaic from the beginning. Passaic shared many similarities with Elizabeth, including a largely Hispanic population, but it was smaller with roughly seventeen schools, about 15,000 students, and a higher percentage of families living in poverty (with almost 95% of students eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch). Furthermore, while Elizabeth had developed a more consistent instructional approach and increased outcomes over the previous ten years, Passaic had experienced very little change or improvement. In fact, when Muñoz arrived, he found considerable differences in the quality of supplies and materials across classrooms and while some district curricula existed, the application of that curricula varied greatly across the district. Into this context, he brought his personal theory of action which had many of the same basic elements as his theory of action in Elizabeth. However, over the course of his first year in Passaic he made several adjustments (see Figure 2).

First, rather than emphasizing "managed" instruction, Muñoz started talking about an "aligned instructional system." Muñoz adopted the term from a colleague in the New Jersey Network because he felt it avoided some of the negative connotations often associated with being "managed" and emphasized the systemic, connected nature of curriculum, assessment, and professional development. Second, Muñoz replaced "loyalty" with "high expectations" as one of the key focus items. As he explained, through their work on instructional rounds in Elizabeth, they saw over and over again, examples where new curricula might be in place, new professional development might be available, but expectations for students remained low, and so he sought to make the development of high expectations a much more central part of his work in Passaic than it had been when he first developed his theory of action in Elizabeth. In addition, he dropped the three "L's" – Love, Laser-like focus on teaching and learning, and Leadership – that had become his "mantra" in Elizabeth. Instead he began to emphasize what he called the two "Q's" – quantity and quality of instruction. This shift allowed him to explain and emphasize key early initiatives in Passaic like creating afterschool and summer school programs that were designed to increase the amount and quality of instruction.

**Figure 2: Muñoz's Personal Theory of Action in Passaic  
(Changes highlighted)**

### **My Theory of Action**

If I lead with a focus on three items:

1. Keeping the school system focused on its vision and mission in an effort to produce excellent results
2. Selecting effective leaders to carry out the mission
3. Getting the resources into the classroom

If I select leaders that focus on six items:

1. Vision
2. Mission
3. The Instructional Core
4. Teamwork
5. Trust
6. High Expectations

If I move the district toward an *Aligned Instructional System* by:

1. creating and implementing aligned, coherent, and detailed curricula
2. developing effective teachers and leaders driven by a culture of high performance
3. providing a comprehensive professional development system
4. setting clear standards and measuring progress through formative and summative assessments
5. building a comprehensive student information system
6. establishing interventions for students, teachers, administrators, and schools
7. measuring performance, progress, and growth

If I develop the school system through the 2Q's guiding principles:

1. Quantity
  - a. We must provide more opportunities for significant student learning, including: after-school, Saturdays, and summers; productive use of classroom time; community partnerships; and digital learning platforms.
2. Quality
  - a. Define what is effective teaching and leading, so that we will provide frequent feedback, evaluation, and professional development.

Then our students will graduate prepared to go to college and will receive high pay in the 21st Century marketplace.

While Muñoz had not articulated his own theory of action in Elizabeth until mid-way through his tenure, in Passaic, he shared his personal theory of action soon after he took his position at one of his first meetings with central office leaders and principals (see

Figure 2). At the same time, however, he made the key elements of his personal theory of action visible in a number of other ways. In particular, Muñoz regularly shared his “leadership story” as he met and talked with different people and groups in his first few months in the district. In the process, he highlighted the importance of high aspirations, vision, and perseverance by talking about his parents; teamwork by talking about his experiences as an athlete; commitment, trust, and love by talking about his experiences as a father; and leadership through the act of telling his leadership story and by beginning to share some of the key quotes and sources of his leadership approach.

Even as he sought to learn about the specific opportunities and challenges in his new district, he also “announced” a vision and the mission consistent with his work in Elizabeth: To become one of the highest performing districts in New Jersey. From Muñoz’s perspective, the mission and vision need to be both audacious and achievable – comparable to what Jim Collin’s calls “big hairy audacious goals” (Collins, 2001). To make clear the extent of the challenge and to highlight the potential for improvement, Muñoz’s initial meetings with Passaic principals included presentations showing specific data that showed the data from the highest performing urban districts in the state on a number of indicators central to Muñoz theory of action. That data showed that elementary students in Union City, another urban New Jersey district with a large number of Hispanic students (Kirp, 2013), outperformed their peers in Passaic by over 20 percentage points in state ELA tests and by more than 15 percentage points in Math. In high school, the data revealed that while graduates at New Jersey’s top-ranked urban high schools took, on average over 5 AP exams by the time they graduated, in Passaic, only about one in four graduates had taken at least one AP exam. In terms of the graduation rate, 71% of Passaic’s entering 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2009 graduated high school four years later in 2013, but in the two highest performing urban high schools in the state, over 90% of the students graduated in four years.

Muñoz took a similar “non-negotiable” approach in pursuing an “aligned instructional system” and in developing a focus on the instructional core, two other key elements of his theory of action. Thus, he quickly initiated a review of district curricula and instructional materials and looked for opportunities to make sure that schools across the district had access to the same level and quality of support. Further, even before explaining the “instructional core” to his colleagues, Muñoz engaged them in conversations and activities that required them to examine and reflect on classroom practices in the district. As he put it, “you have to be able to write about it and talk about it, and your actions have to match your written word and your spoken word.” In particular, in his first meetings with principals individually and in groups, he invited them to tell him how they were improving teaching and learning in their schools and talked with them about their hiring and personnel decisions and how that might affect their ability to improve instruction. When he accompanied principals on informal walkthroughs in their buildings, he also modeled

### ***Passaic Public Schools***

#### ***Vision***

*The Passaic Public Schools will be the best urban school system in the State of New Jersey.*

#### ***Mission***

*The Passaic Public Schools will provide an excellent education that prepares our students for college and to earn high-paying jobs.*

#### ***Focus***

*The Passaic Public Schools will provide all students the opportunity to graduate high school with a career certification and/or a minimum of 15 college credits.*



an attention to the content of instruction and what teachers and students were doing; shared readings that featured the instructional core; and then, at the beginning of his second year, the district implemented instructional rounds district-wide as a key means of focusing on instruction across the district.

Muñoz's investment in staff and leadership development was also evident in the significant amount of his time in the first year that he devoted to meeting with and interviewing personnel, assessing and finding school leaders, and establishing his senior leadership team. In many ways, his conversations and interviews reflected the kind of "one-on-one" conversations that community organizers use to identify individuals who can take on leadership roles (Hatch, 1998) and the ideas of management guru's like Jim Collins (2001) who emphasize the need to get the "right people on the bus" and also to get those people into the "right seats." Through these interviews and conversations, he introduced a focus on the instructional core as a central element of his theory of action, made clear that he expected his colleagues to pay attention to it, and gained an initial assessment of who already was or was willing to make such a focus central to their work.

In addition to using a commitment to the instructional core as a means of assessing potential leaders in the district, he also reached out to key allies whom he knew shared his commitment. To serve as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, he brought in Raina Sands, who had developed and led much of the work related to instructional rounds and professional development in Elizabeth. In addition, to fill the position of Director of Elementary and Secondary Education in Passaic, he recruited a principal, James Tenant, from a neighboring district whom he had met through the New Jersey Network. Tenant came highly recommended by his previous superintendent, who highlighted Tenants' commitment to the instructional core and his role in working to eliminate lower level classes in his middle school. As a result of these staff-building efforts, Muñoz was able to create an entirely new senior management team and he replaced about 50% of the school district administrators in his first year.

### **Putting the theory into policy and practice**

As in Elizabeth, Muñoz also made the development of a district theory of action a focus of his work with the Passaic Board. In fact, Muñoz began to lay the groundwork for the development of a set of district policies based on a district theory of action even before he was hired. In his initial interviews with the Passaic board, for example, he stressed that he would need time to learn about the specific circumstances in Passaic, but also talked about aspects of his work in Elizabeth that reflected key elements of what he now called his "aligned instructional system" approach. In addition, Muñoz stressed the crucial role the Elizabeth Board played in developing and endorsing that approach, and he gave them much of the credit for the improvements in outcomes that the district had made. In response to a question about how he was able to be successful in Elizabeth he explained that he "had certain ideas, some were personal beliefs, some came from readings, some from the work with the Broad network, some from the work with the Panasonic Foundation, but ultimately it was the Board that had to take action and support my recommendations and they did."

Once Muñoz was hired and began work in Passaic in October of 2013, he quickly worked with the board to establish budget priorities that reflected key aspects of the

“aligned instructional system” theory of action. For example, for the 2014-15 budget (adopted in the spring of 2014), he proposed investing in new curricula and instructional materials across the district, expanding AP offerings, and implementing instructional rounds. From Muñoz’s perspective, pursuing a budget process based on the key pillars of a theory of action was a vast change from the previous work in the district (and many districts) which he characterized as focusing on “making sure that what was in the budget one year was in the budget next year and more.” After working with the board to establish budget priorities, Muñoz began talking with the board members explicitly about incorporating that theory into board policy. At first, some members of the board felt that specifically naming and endorsing the theory of action in board policy was unnecessary. From their perspective, the budget was what mattered, and it already reflected the “aligned instructional system” approach. However, Muñoz explained that, if they were serious about becoming a better school district, he not only needed their support, but he needed to be able to have visible directives from the board that reinforced his key priorities. As he explained it to them: “I’m only as strong as the board allows me to be, and if it’s in board policy, we convey that we are working together.” At the same time, a board member happened to see a copy of the book *“The Redesign of Urban School Systems”* (McAdams & Katzir, 2013) sitting on his desk and asked about it. Muñoz responded by giving him a copy, and the next time Muñoz talked about the need for a board policy reflecting the theory action, the board member nodded, and said “now, I get it.” Although discovering a relevant book on a desk sounds like a chance occurrence, for Muñoz it reflects his embrace of a philosophy endorsed by individuals as varied as the Roman philosopher Seneca and the race car driver Bobby Unser: “Luck is a matter of preparation meeting opportunity.” Providing materials, offering readings, modeling, sharing ideas in informal conversations, are all a part of Muñoz’s efforts to seed the environment with opportunities for his colleagues to see and explore key elements of the theory of action.

Ultimately, Muñoz and his colleague Sands, who had been through the same process in Elizabeth, drafted a policy for discussion, and after some debate and adaptations, the board adopted the district theory of action in the fall of 2014 (see Appendix 2), near the beginning of Muñoz’s first full year in Passaic. That policy explained that a theory of action was needed to “drive policies, budgets, and administrative strategies in order to transform the culture and positively impact the teaching and learning culture of the Passaic Public Schools into one of high performance in both academics and operations.”

### **Establishing a focus for the theory of action**

Although the theory of action that Muñoz pursued in Passaic was consistent with his approach in Elizabeth, the adoption of what Muñoz and Sands now call a “district focus” was an entirely new development. At about the same time as he transitioned to Passaic, Muñoz also participated in a New Jersey Network activity to identify and develop a strategy to address a specific issue of equity that could be used as a basis for district-wide improvements that benefitted all students. In response to that activity Muñoz asked Sands to identify some of the barriers and challenges that students were facing in the district and that were contributing to inequities. Among the most prominent that Sands identified was a low graduation rate in comparison to demographically similar districts. Drawing on both national local data, Sands also recognized, that raising the graduation rate would not be sufficient to reach the district’s goal of preparing all students for college. Reflecting a particular problem for

students who have been under-represented in college, including large numbers of students of color, Sands noted that even some of their students who met the standards for graduation did not meet the requirements for enrolling in post-secondary education or they were required to take remedial courses when they did enroll. These students faced increased costs and the prospect of having to spend more time to earn the necessary credits than their peers, significantly lengthening their path to college graduation and increasing their odds of dropping out entirely.<sup>2</sup>

Sands saw going beyond high school graduation to address the issues of remediation and preparation for college as particularly urgent in Passaic, where many of the students are first-generation college students, most of whom enroll first in community colleges, and many of whom rely on aid and loans in order to attend. At the same time, her review of challenges and opportunities in the district also showed that Passaic already had a small group of students who were participating in programs that enabled them to enroll in classes in a nearby community college and to gain college credits while in high school. Seizing the opportunity to expand and build on these programs, Sands proposed a district-wide focus on ensuring that all students have the opportunity to graduate with at least 15 college credits and/or a career certification. Muñoz quickly endorsed the plan and publicly announced the district “focus” in February of 2015.

Reflecting the district theory of action, Muñoz and Sands and colleagues sought to create an aligned instructional system around the district focus by streamlining requirements, expanding course offerings, increasing supports for students who were struggling, and working to raise expectations. Their initiatives began with efforts to align the schedule, course offerings, and assessments to form a series of “pathways” – sets of courses – leading to graduation. Those pathways are currently being designed to ensure that all Passaic high school students have the opportunity to graduate with at least fifteen college credits and/or a career certification while also providing opportunities for students to go beyond that to achieve a 30 credit certificate/ Associate’s Degree. In order to develop these pathways, Sands has been working with teams of teachers, counselors, and administrators to review the challenges and opportunities for students in the district to get college level credit while still in high school. First, an examination of program and course requirements by Tenant, the Director of Elementary and Secondary Education, identified a slew of pre-requisites and inconsistent policies and expectations that kept many students from accessing the courses that could lead to college credit. Often these prerequisites included requirements that students were already enrolled in and performing well in honors and/or Advanced Placement courses. Sands lamented, “You automatically take out of consideration all these students who were not already in an honors and whittled the eligible pool down to these tiny groups of students.” In response, when Tenant showed Muñoz the list of programs and courses he had compiled, Muñoz simply crossed many of the prerequisites out.

Sands also noted a key bottleneck and opportunity: passing the College Board’s Accuplacer tests used to determine whether or not incoming students need

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<sup>2</sup> For example, some studies suggest that only one in four students who take remedial courses in post-secondary institutions ever graduate or obtain a certificate from those institutions (Bailey, 2009).

remediation. These tests are used by many of the public colleges and universities Passaic's students seek to attend, yet few if any of Passaic's students even knew of the Accuplacer's existence before they attempted to enroll. As Sands explained it, when their students go to a college or community college: "they walk in, they register, and the school says 'you have to take the Accuplacer', and the students says 'Oh, what's that?' and the college says 'it's a placement exam.' And the student says 'Okay, when do I take it?' The student has no idea the Accuplacer even exists, they have no idea about the content, and they have no preparation to take it." If they failed, they would be placed in remedial courses. In fact, their analysis of initial data revealed the magnitude of the problem: In the fall of the 2015-16 school year, only 22% of Passaic seniors scored high enough in ELA and math to reach the Accuplacer's category of "Qualified for high school graduation". Further, while 48% of seniors in general education need to improve their scores in both ELA and math to qualify, 78% of ELL students, and 89% of special education students have to improve their scores in both ELA and math.

"So what we're doing is trying to change that game," Sands explained. To do so, Passaic is in the midst of a new initiative that involves administering the Accuplacer to all their juniors and seniors (the first such large-scale use of the Accuplacer that Sands is aware of). The district will get the data on who passed almost immediately. On the one hand, this data will enable them to identify students who are already eligible to enroll in courses providing college credit while still in high school. (In fact, due to recent policy changes, passing the Accuplacer now serves as one way to meet New Jersey's high school graduation requirements). On the other hand, it will allow them to identify students who need additional support, and Sands and colleagues plan to use the data to help design afterschool and summer school programs directly targeting students' needs. In short, by increasing the number of students who pass the Accuplacer, they will also increase the number of Passaic students who will not need to take remedial classes in college *and* these students will be eligible to start earning college credits while still in high school. In a related effort to provide more support, the district is also requiring all freshman and sophomores to take the PSAT and all juniors to take the SAT. Among the juniors, those who have not met the college eligibility requirements have an SAT prep class incorporated into their schedules.

The district also began expanding programs and courses in the district that already offered college level credits. In particular, as in Elizabeth, Muñoz and Sands launched a major push to increase the number of students enrolled in AP courses and taking AP exams. Sands also worked with local community colleges to expand existing summer programming that would allow Passaic high school students to take onsite college courses. Further, they established a partnership with one community college to highlight and increase access to a joint early-college initiative. That initiative was designed to enable some Passaic students to take and get credit for college courses as part of their regular coursework during the school year.

Offering these new opportunities for students to get so many college credits required an entirely new schedule, and therefore, Muñoz and Sands used the new district focus to transform the high school schedule in 2014-15 and the middle school schedule in 2015-16. In the process, consistent with their aligned instructional system approach, they sought to eliminate wide variations in the level, quality, and enrollments of the courses that were offered. In particular, they sought to combine a number of classes with very

low enrollments and to make sure that teachers were assigned to appropriate classes. To do so, they worked within the constraints of the district's contract with the teacher's union to shift from a schedule with 8 periods in a day to 9 periods. In the process, they were able to streamline the courses offered, to create more consistent demands and expectations for all teachers, to begin to establish clearer pathways toward graduation and beyond, and to produce more opportunities for students to take advanced placement courses and to get college credits while still in high school. Perhaps most importantly, Sands stressed that these efforts were designed explicitly to reflect the new emphasis on "high expectations" that Muñoz's added to his personal theory of action when he came to Passaic. As she put it, they sought to eliminate courses in Passaic that did not deliver high expectations as one crucial step in addressing their district focus, but also began implementing instructional rounds (which they launched in 2014-15) to help develop a common understanding of those high expectations for college and beyond. In particular, the rounds engages teachers and administrators in reflecting specifically on the level of rigor of the instructional tasks they observe and the extent to which those tasks are asking students to use the kinds of higher-level skills that will prepare them for college. As Sands puts it, if the task is simply asking students to memorize facts and follow directions, "what career is that preparing them for?"

#### **The next level of work in Passaic**

Throughout his transition into Passaic, Muñoz tried to make sure that his key decisions, activities, and conversations and presentations reflected his personal theory of action and laid the groundwork for putting the district theory of action into practice and policy. He wanted to make it as clear as possible that the district was intent on increasing the amount, consistency and quality of instruction. From his perspective, that aim was communicated when he chose not to close the schools for weather as often as his predecessor and when he eliminated a number of half-days. It was reflected in the summer and before- and afterschool programs created in his first year. It was expressed as well in the new instructional materials, new schedule, and new opportunities to achieve college credits in which the district invested; and it was demonstrated in his concentration on quickly identifying and putting in place leaders throughout the district who are dedicated to the vision and mission and willing and able to focus on the instructional core.

At the same time, the future plans or "next level of work" for the district make evident Muñoz's personal theory of action as well as the organization theory of action that guides work throughout the district. He envisions a "cradle-to-college" system that includes high quality pre-school options for all students as well as expansions of the initial efforts to develop dual credit programs and to offer college-level classes. He wants to implement more intervention programs to increase support for struggling students. For example, in 2015, he introduced AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination a program designed explicitly for underperforming students) in 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades, with plans to expand the program to 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade as well. He and his colleagues have already changed graduation requirements from 120 credits to 150 credits (effectively adding the equivalent of a full year of instruction) and tightened policies on student and staff attendance, and they are continuing to work on making grading more consistent and clarifying policies on promotion and retention. Muñoz also wants to continue to stress the focus on the instructional core and on increasing the consistency and quality and high expectations of classroom instruction by expanding

instructional rounds and improving professional development.

### Challenges for pursuing theories of action

Muñoz's initial work in Passaic illustrates that personal theories of action can be used both as a basis for individual reflection and a strategic guide for system-wide work. Muñoz's personal theory of action signals his commitments as a leader and shapes the way he spends his time. The district theory of action provides a shared, coherent approach that supports individual and collective decision-making and acts as a source for group reflection and common learning. The district focus provides an ambitious but achievable goal along the path to the fulfillment of the vision and mission.

At the same time, William's approach also raises questions about how public and open to be about the specific elements of his district strategy and theory of action. Thus, while Muñoz does share his personal theory of action with his colleagues, he thinks carefully about how he describes his strategy and what he emphasizes. When Muñoz shared his personal theory of action in Passaic, for example, Tenant noted that the word "accountability" was not included in the Districts' theory of action. "That's a good point," Muñoz responded, before describing how he is always thinking about how his actions and public statements will affect how quickly the work moves forward. "When I manage and lead a district, I generally think about three things," Muñoz explained. "I think about the overall work that has to be done, which is the **scope**. Then I think about the phasing in of pieces, the **sequence**. And I think about how fast I phase these things in, which is the **speed**." Muñoz added that he did not want to start his work in Passaic with debates about accountability, although, as he put it, "We deal with that through our actions every day, because we're going to hold staff accountable. We're going to evaluate you. We're going to write to you. We're going to be in your schools. We're going to request that you hit certain academic goals. And we're going to do accountability; I just don't want it to be an explicit conversation."

Similarly, while Muñoz saw a district focus on ensuring students graduate with fifteen college credits or a career certification as appealing to many, if not all members of the community, he also knew that changing program requirements and changing the schedule could be controversial. As a consequence, rather than engaging in a public debate about the merits of eliminating pre-requisites or of changing the schedule, he and his colleagues simply went ahead and did it. As Tenant commented after Muñoz crossed out of many of the pre-requisites for higher level courses in Passaic, what Muñoz did in 20 minutes took countless hours in community meetings when his previous district engaged in the effort to eliminate some lower level courses. At the same time, Muñoz prepared for possible backlash by gathering his administrative team together beforehand and asking them to think about what they would like the newspaper headlines to say if reporters called them up and asked them about the program changes and the changes in the teachers' schedules. As a group, they concluded that "Muñoz makes teachers teach" summed up the strategy. While there were some objections from teachers who were most affected (some of whom chose to leave the district through retirement or other means), there was relatively little public outcry from those who saw the moves as increasing the amount of instructional time for students. Whether or not such a strategy would work in other districts remains to be seen. Some of Muñoz's network colleagues share his concerns about creating resistance and have chosen to "depopulate" lower level courses, leaving them on the books, but

placing no students in them. Others have stated their plans to eliminate lower level tracks publicly, and moved ahead regardless of opposition.

In both Elizabeth and Passaic, William's choice to avoid using the term "equity" has also been a subject of debate within the New Jersey Network. While the Network has asked superintendents to identify and pursue a specific equity goal, Muñoz is cautious about referring publicly to the district's "focus" as an equity goal because of his concern that it could be divisive. As he said at one of the network meetings, "we have to do something, and we have to give it a name, but we can't call it an equity goal." From his perspective as a superintendent who works in districts where the large majority of students are Hispanic and large numbers of students of all races are not achieving at the same levels as their counterparts in wealthier districts, highlighting within district gaps in performance between minority groups, particularly between Hispanic and African-American students, can exacerbate racial tensions in the community and undermine rather than support improvement efforts. As he described it when he was in Elizabeth, there were two groups battling for power: "The group that's in control wants to portray an image to the community that schools are doing well, they have gotten better over the last ten years, but highlighting racial subgroups could create a rallying cry for [the other group]." Instead, Muñoz explained "my approach has always been to talk about excellence for all... And then the students that are trailing, whether they're bilingual students, special education students, students from a particular racial group, you start to think about the interventions they may need...and just make it about the work you're doing." As he put it, "equity goals, focus, accountability, in print versus not in print, are all kind of strategic political decisions on my part, depending on where I am in the process."

### **Questions for the future**

Different approaches to using theories of action reflect different hypotheses about leadership. Muñoz's believes that when he shares his personal theory of action, models his commitment to the instructional core, and repeatedly highlights key elements of his leadership approach, he can help to develop the leadership capacity he sees as central to achieving the districts' goals. Further, he believes that articulating a district theory of action in a set of board policies provides those leaders with the resources and authority needed to improve instruction across every school and classroom and meet the district's long-term goals.

At the same time, William's approach illustrate some of the key challenges for using theories of action, including:

- When and how should leaders make key elements of their theories of action and particularly a focus on equity and race explicit and public parts of their district strategy?
- How can leaders develop theories of action that support district-wide work overall and provide specific guidance for dealing with high-leverage, systemic problems at the same time?
- How can leaders remain committed to the beliefs and values that undergird their work while also remaining open to learning and to adapting their goals and their theories of action to fit different contexts?

These questions highlight inherent tensions in using theories of action for learning and for leading. While learning and leadership should go hand in hand, one often takes precedence over the other. Thus, once a district theory of action and an associated strategic plan have been developed, there may be a tendency to focus on implementation – on making sure that the theory of action is implemented with “fidelity.” After all, if the hypotheses of a theory of action are not tested in practice, then what learning can take place? Yet, placing the emphasis on implementing a theory of action and waiting to see the results a year or two down the line may discourage individuals and groups from noticing the problems with implementation that are already providing information about how the theory of action needs to be adjusted.

Managing this learning/leading dilemma entails recognizing that the practice of using the theory of action is as important as the content. It is the practice of developing hypotheses, reflecting on them, and regularly making adjustments that fuels continuous learning and increases the organization’s ability to meet its long-term goals. In short, using theories of action to improve outcomes for all students district-wide demands both an unwavering commitment to key beliefs and expectations as well as a strategic awareness of how to pursue those beliefs and expectations while constantly learning on the job.



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## Appendix 1

### Muñoz's Recommended Readings for School & District Leaders

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: *A Leadership Fable*, Patrick Lencioni, © 2002

In the Arena: *Building the Skills for Peak Performance in Leading Schools and Systems*, Tim Quinn, Ph.D., © October 2010

Instructional Rounds in Education: *A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, © 2009

Wooden on Leadership: *How to Create a Winning Organization*, John Wooden and Steve Jamison, © 2005

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: *Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, Stephen R. Covey, © 1989

Winning, Jack Welch and Suzy Welch, © 2005

The Dream Manager, Matthew Kelly, © 2007

The Toyota Way, Jeffrey Liker, © 2004

The Redesign of Urban School Systems: *Case Studies in District Governance*, Donald R. McAdams and Dan Katzir, © 2013

The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: *Follow Them and People Will Follow You*, John C. Maxwell, © 1998

Failing Forward: *Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success*, John C. Maxwell, © 2000

The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork: *Embrace Them and Empower Your Team*, John C. Maxwell, © 2001

5 Levels of Leadership: *Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential*, John C. Maxwell, © 2011

Built to Last: *Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, © 1994

Good to Great: *Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*, Jim Collins, © 2001

Good to Great and the Social Sectors: *Why Business Thinking is not the Answer*, Jim Collins, © 2005

How the Mighty Fall: *And Why Some Companies Never Give In*, Jim Collins, © 2009

Great by Choice: *Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck* - Why Some Thrive Despite them All, Jim Collins, © 2011

“Building a New Structure for School Leadership”, Richard Elmore, © 2000

## Appendix 2

### Passaic Theory of Action: An Aligned Instructional System

#### Introduction

In order to implement and achieve the Vision and Mission of the Passaic Public Schools, the Board of Education is committed to creating and sustaining a high performing school district that educates all children and eliminates achievement gaps. It is with this belief that the Board of Education adopts the Theory of Action: *An Aligned Instructional System* to drive policies, budgets, and administrative strategies in order to transform the culture and positively impact the teaching and learning culture of the Passaic Public Schools into one of high performance in both academics and operations.

The theory of action builds on our beliefs and educational research about how children learn, the conditions that best promote learning, and the policies, management systems, and culture that best promote the commitments and high performance of our employees to serve a highly mobile student population in an economically and demographically diverse district. It also reflects our commitment to exceed accountability standards at all levels.

We recognize that all schools are not the same: the needs of children, the capacity of the workforce, and the demands of parents vary from one school community to another. Furthermore, we wish to create a performance rather than compliance work culture and unleash innovation to continuously improve teaching and learning and all school operations.

The Theory of Action addresses the following six areas:

#### *Curriculum*

A coherent and aligned curriculum will address every subject, for every grade, pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The curriculum will include the content standards, or expected student learning objectives, and a scope and sequence by grading period. Such a curriculum will be inclusive of model lesson plans, teaching materials, and assessments, all of which are to be available for easy and timely access.

Through the Theory of Action for *An Aligned Instructional System*, our intention is to provide teachers maximum freedom to teach according to their teaching style and best professional judgment, consistent with high levels of student mastery of the district curriculum.

#### *Assessment*

Assessments are conducted, and the results are disaggregated through the data management system by subject, grade level, classroom, teacher, student group, and individual student. In addition, data are analyzed for each student, classroom, grade level, school, and district.

#### *Interventions*

Timely and effective interventions ensure all students have access to the curriculum and equitable opportunity for mastery and success.

### ***Professional Development***

All members of the Passaic Public Schools learning community will participate as active adult learners in comprehensive professional development system based on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and use of data to increase student learning and achievement.

### ***Human Resources***

To support a culture of high performance, the Passaic Public Schools must recruit, hire, and retain professional faculty, support staff, instructional leaders, and operational leaders. All policies, structures, and practices related to human resources must support this objective.

### ***Student Information Systems***

A comprehensive student information system must be developed and supported in order to collect critical student achievement data necessary to build a responsive instructional culture.

## **Change Management**

*An Aligned Instructional System* represents the development of a systemic shift in all aspects of the district operations. It represents a shift into a tightly integrated instructional system that requires change across the organization. This policy will serve as framework for development of policy and budgets, as the district builds a coherent and aligned system around instruction. Such a change requires the support of all participants in the educational system: teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders.

The Passaic Board of Education believes that adopting *An Aligned Instructional System* as a theory of action for change provides a foundation for the critical work necessary to support student learning. It is essential that we recognize that this theory of action may require revisiting and revision on a periodic basis; it is required that we frequently evaluate our plans and expectations for the school system. This board will work to communicate and educate future board members to maintain the commitment to this vision, so that the children of Passaic are provided the education that will lead them to success.