



# Building Strong School Leadership Teams to Sustain Reform

Effective Instructional Leadership Teams can be integral to helping underperforming schools strengthen their leadership, professional learning systems and core instruction.

**Administrators** in low performing schools face many challenges, but they do not have to tackle them alone. By bringing a small group of teachers and instructional coaches together to form an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), a principal can tap into the collective wisdom and energy of the staff to help move a school forward.

An ILT works on behalf of the whole school to develop a vision, set goals, design strategies and monitor progress. Specific projects might include creating an intervention system for students falling below grade level, setting up peer coaching opportunities among teachers or analyzing student achievement data to evaluate programs.

Establishing such systems as a team generally leads to more robust implementation by the staff because teachers have been given a voice in designing those efforts, and ILT members have planned the implementation from a variety of perspectives. Designing solutions collaboratively also tends to sustain re-

form. Broadly shared goals and strategies tend to outlast those held by a single school leader.

Having an Instructional Leadership Team also benefits the principal because it gives her greater insight into teachers' successes and challenges. It also helps staff members get to know the principal and her responsibilities better, which tends to foster trust and create allies for her as she leads school improvement efforts.

## Ensuring ILTs are effective

In our work at Partners in School Innovation, we help underperforming schools strengthen their leadership, professional learning systems and core instruction. We believe that effective ILTs are integral to helping schools improve in all three of those areas, and we have learned that strong ILTs are marked by several characteristics.

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By Brian Edwards and  
Jessica Gammell

First, good ILTs include the principal and a core group of other stakeholders committed to improving instruction and student learning. Among those stakeholders should be a teacher leader from each grade, grade span or department. Teams also benefit from having resource and specialist teachers involved. Although high-performing staff members who model the school's culture are ideal members, an ILT is most effective when it includes people with a range of perspectives and backgrounds. Having diverse viewpoints represented in the planning of schoolwide strategies will foster smoother implementation when programs roll out to the whole staff.

Strong ILTs also agree upon their mission and ways of working and document those agreements. All members of an ILT need to be clear about the team's purpose, goals, method and frequency of communication, decision-making protocols, and means of holding each other accountable.

To provide appropriate support and leadership for the school staff, an ILT needs pro-

TECTED time to meet regularly. Although the principal may be a leading voice on the team, all members of the ILT should play a role in planning and facilitating ILT meetings. However, the school's key reform strategies should be standing items on the agenda to ensure that the ILT gives sustained attention to those strategies.

That attention needs to be focused like a laser on instructional matters, such as trends observed in classroom walk-throughs, the design of professional development offerings, and patterns in academic performance data. Ideally, schools already have strong grade-level or departmental teams, which means that ILTs concentrate on schoolwide issues. If those grade-level or departmental teams do not exist, the ILT will want to make it a priority to establish them.

Finally, members of an effective Instructional Leadership Team recognize that their decisions have consequences for others in the school and understand that they need to be strong in implementing their decisions, but also supportive of fellow staff members.

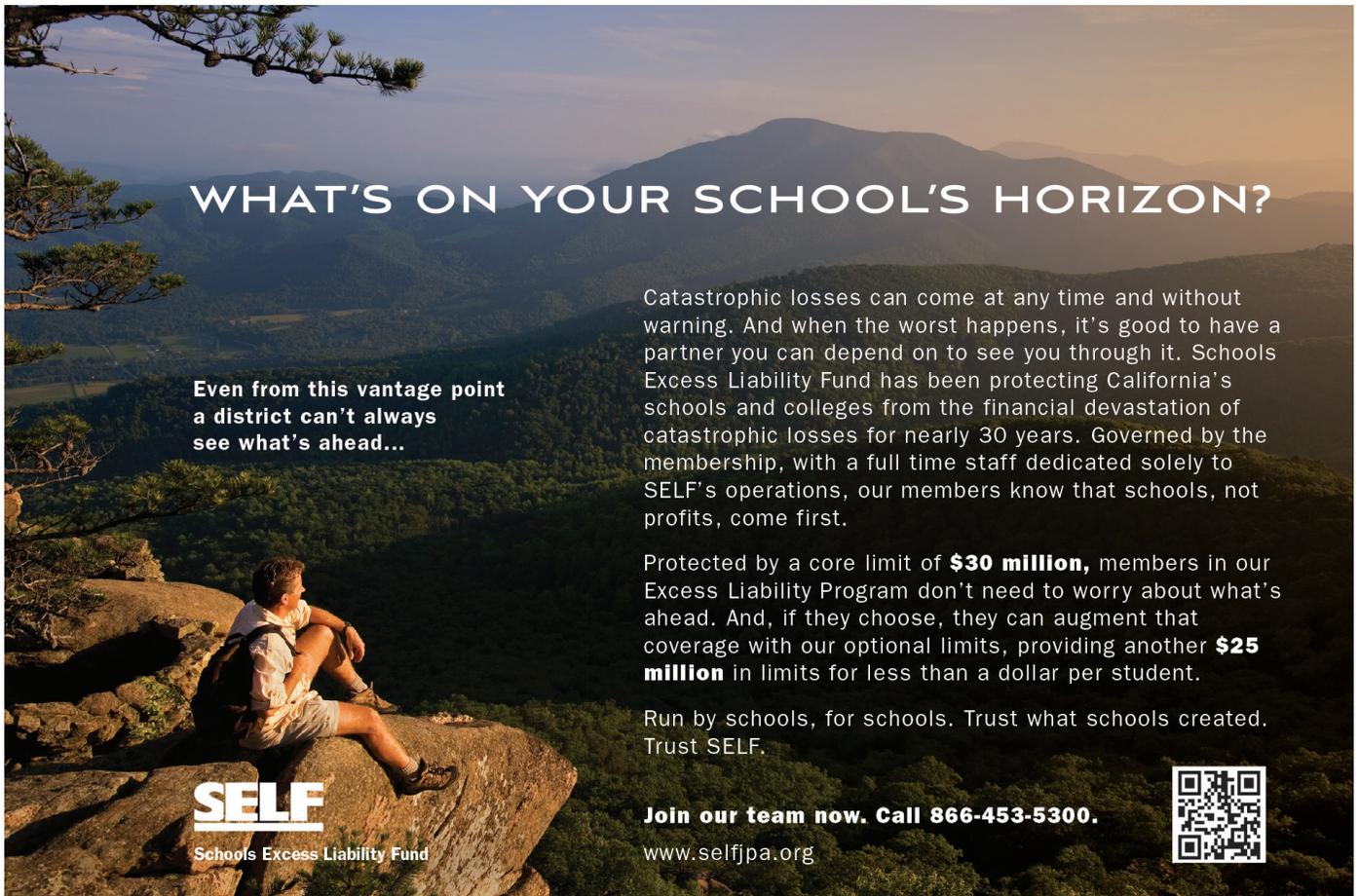
### Fostering professional growth

As ILT members contribute their ideas, perspectives and energy to improving their school, they grow as professionals.

For example, an instructional coach who spends most of his day providing individualized guidance to teachers or leading grade-level professional development will, as part of an ILT, need to do deeper analyses of data and apply his expertise in new ways to solve schoolwide issues. As the coach builds his skills, he becomes more able to help the school sharpen its focus and tighten alignment across grades.

Similarly, teachers grow professionally because ILT activities require members to think beyond a single classroom and work from a systems perspective. This broader vision rounds out the planning and facilitation skills that ILT members may have gained from being a departmental chair or leader of a grade-level team.

Taking part in an ILT also helps a teacher become a leader who is invested in the success of the school without leaving the class-



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We have seen teachers become members of Instructional Leadership Teams and blossom as leaders within their schools and beyond. In this way, instructional leadership teams strengthen schools today and create school leaders of the future.

room behind. This is especially true when an ILT works explicitly on the leadership skills of its members – for example, discussing what it means to be a leader and reflecting regularly on challenges and successes that members experience as they lead their peers in strengthening instruction.

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### Facing ILT challenges

Although an ILT provides many benefits to a school and the team's individual members, ILTs can also face challenges. For example, the work of the team may not always be appreciated by non-ILT teachers, with some feeling the ILT is just one more group who tells teachers what to do. Team members can minimize this dynamic by establishing formal channels of communication between the ILT and teachers' work groups at the grade or department level. Members of the Instructional Leadership Team should welcome input and communicate that one of the main purposes of the team is to ensure teachers' perspectives are represented when school-level decisions are made.

A challenge for ILT members in some

schools is difficulty finding successors. This can leave members feeling that the long-term success of the school depends solely on them. What would ideally happen instead is that new members would join from time to time as long-serving members are rotated out so that a broad cross-section of the staff gets to play a part in leading the school. Current team members can help make that happen by identifying potential leaders and working with them to expand their role in the school. With a little coaxing and coaching, some teachers who do not think of themselves as leaders can eventually join the ILT and play a key part in realizing the larger vision for the school.

Another challenge arises from the fact that instructional leadership activities often occur outside the regular school day. In response, teacher-leaders must adopt a flexible schedule, using time typically spent preparing for their own classes to support the ILT. If district and school leaders can find funds to compensate team members for the extra time and effort, the ILT will likely be more stable and have higher morale.

### Creating educators CA needs

Despite these challenges, an Instructional Leadership Team can help bring about great improvements in a school. Such a team ex-

tends the scope of leadership beyond what school administrators can achieve alone, and ensures staff members gain greater ownership over their work. In the process, staff members build their leadership capacity and become collaborative change agents.

As the responsibilities of school leaders rise with the implementation of the Common Core and Local Control and Accountability Plans, California will need more and more educators who have a learning orientation and collaborative leadership style. One promising way to develop these educators of tomorrow is to build strong Instructional Leadership Teams today.

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