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## Theory of action: The care and feeding of your mission

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*Having a clear theory of action can help education leaders ensure that the work they're doing successfully meets the needs of the school community.*



In education, we share a common commitment to supporting students' growth and development, but we often have many different ideas about what that support looks like. What kinds of choice should students have in what and how they learn? What is the role of schools in building and supporting students' social-emotional health? What is the cause of major disparities in achievement between groups of students, and what should we do to fix it? How we answer these questions and many others informs the theories of action or theories of learning that drive what we do in schools.

At first glance, building a theory of action can seem like an academic exercise. Indeed, many theories have ended up that way, most likely because they were written or conceptualized in inaccessible ways. There is a worse danger, however, in failing to examine our assumptions about learning and how they inform the design of schools, curricula, and instruction. As David Labaree (2021) has explained in these pages, there is a "grammar of schooling" that has become such an embedded and invisible part of schooling that anyone entering education must know, understand, and echo that grammar to be taken seriously. When we do not deliberately consider and name these elements in a cohesive theory of action, we are at risk of making incoherent decisions about how to structure and support our educational systems.

A theory of action describes how an organization intends to work to create the outcomes it wants. The idea of a theory of action is closely associated with two other terms frequently bandied about in educational circles: *theory of change* and *theory of learning* (Brown, 2020; Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). Navigating the subtle distinctions different authors

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make between these terms can derail the process of building a meaningful theory. In general, however, the choice of terms is far less important than the development and application of the theory. Instead of getting caught up in the distinctions between terms, use the term that resonates most strongly in your own community.

Good theories of action are built with deliberation and focus, empowering people at all levels of the system to rally for meaningful change in a way that allows the work to continue despite shifts in staffing or policy. Crafting a strong theory of action that can transform a classroom, school building, or district does not have to be unduly difficult. Following a few simple guidelines can help make a strong theory of action almost write itself.

## Search for the real problem

One of the most common mistakes well-meaning leaders make when crafting a theory of action is to assume they know what the problems and solutions are from the start. However, jumping right into a theory of action without first exploring the problem with stakeholders at every level means that we may miss important context, which will lead us to either fail to identify the real problem or solve for the wrong problem.

Searching for the real problem starts with putting humans at the center and understanding how the system affects students, families, parents, leadership teams, and even community members. This means engaging in deep conversations with individuals from all these groups to learn about their experiences, desires, and perceptions and being willing to challenge long-held assumptions about what we should want in our systems. Too often, we simply look at test scores or attendance rates and turn to the experts to determine how to improve those numbers. When we do this, we miss essential context that helps us get to the root of the problems our students and schools face.

When trying to understand the problems in our school, we should be asking lots of questions of as many stakeholders as possible: What do the historical trends in our students' results tell us? Who is struggling? What are they struggling with? Who is succeeding? How do people in the system feel about the challenges we are facing? What challenges do people care about the most? Why? Asking questions to stakeholders at different places in the system can help us identify deeper, more significant challenges.

Consider a question like "How do we increase math scores on a state test?" One common approach is to increase the intensity of math instruction by adopting a new math curriculum or getting rid of special subjects to allow for a double dose of math. These may be great solutions to the problem if the root of the issue really is a curriculum

that leaves out key concepts or if students have missed large chunks of instruction. However, we might instead discover that neither teachers nor students in a particular elementary school feel comfortable with math. It might be that hiring and attrition have left us with great teachers who have experience teaching math in lower grades, but few teachers with practical experience teaching math in upper elementary grades. In these situations, time and resources might be better spent helping upper elementary teachers become more comfortable and confident with the content.

## Identify your assets and define success

A good theory of action emphasizes conditions within the school or district. This involves understanding not just what needs to improve but what is going well. What is this school or district best at? What is it able to accomplish? What are the things it will choose to focus on? Answering these types of questions can help clarify your sense of purpose and communicate how you can build on your assets in ways that keep the work manageable and effective.

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Just like with identifying the problem within the system, understanding assets begins with talking to the stakeholders across all levels about what they like and value in their schools. This process can help you identify assets you may not even know you have. Honoring what we are good at, even as we admit where we may be falling short, helps create momentum and buy-in.

Every school building has things to celebrate and things that people love. It might be the rich diversity in the school, a community that rallies behind students, excellent teachers, an outstanding music and arts program, fruitful partnerships with a local college or scientific lab, or myriad other things. These strengths and reasons to celebrate must be part of any theory of action. In a system that is known for high-quality arts and music, foregoing these activities in favor of extra math or reading time is likely to alienate those who take pride in the arts programs; getting buy-in for such a solution is unlikely. If leaders try to move forward with such a solution, parents, students, and teachers are unlikely to be enthusiastic about it or be willing to implement it with the fidelity needed to succeed.

Understanding what the school community values also will help you define what success looks like. As Larry Cuban has explained, there are many ways to define a successful education:

We might consider one school to be good because it sends 99% of its students to college, another because its graduates go on to take leadership roles in the community, another because all of its students' complete apprenticeships with companies and city agencies, and so on. And each of those goals can be adapted and reinterpreted. (Heller, 2020)

Choosing one or another of these paths to success in a vacuum, without communicating with stakeholders about what we expect schools to do for students, limits our ability to be innovative and keeps the logic of what we do away from the teachers, families, and students who deserve to understand it the most.

As you talk with your stakeholders early on to understand the problem and to identify your hidden assets, you will most likely start hearing about their hopes and dreams for their students and schools. Honest, open conversations among teachers, students, parents, community members, and leadership teams about their hopes for students can help the entire education community align around a common vision, create a shared sense of urgency, and garner support for the work needed to enact that vision.

## Align and communicate

Once you understand the real problem, uncover your hidden assets, and come to a shared understanding of success, you are ready to begin developing the theory of action to guide your efforts. Your theory of action should include an explicit statement of what you've learned: We are good at X, we want to change Y, and we will know we are successful for our students when we see Z. Keeping these ideas at the forefront of your theory of action allows you to start enacting change in a way that your stakeholders can support. This theory of change should inform your internal communication, external communication, and overall decision making.

Communicating internally about what your organization seeks to accomplish is critical to ensuring everyone within the organization stays dedicated and engaged. Educators in particular can become understandably frustrated when the measures for judging their effectiveness and impact are separated from a broader vision of how and why they teach. In addition, they often see new programs as something being done to them and not with them. This is especially true of programs that feel disconnected from teachers' work in the classroom and from their own theories of action.

A shared theory of action can serve your internal audience by describing the ways your school intends to make a difference for students. By highlighting certain elements of education you believe to be ripe for change, you can rally support around what you do well

already and create support necessary to shift in a new direction. The theory of action can serve as your reference point for a long-term mission, providing a central place everyone can return to when they need to remember why their work matters.

Externally, a theory of action can help your organization stand out. When looking for new funding, justifying existing funding, seeking to gain influence, or building a network of supporters and allies, being able to describe quickly and elegantly what you do is key. A theory of action is a succinct statement built on the research, experiences, and ideas that support your approach. Those outside your district or school may not want to hear all the data points behind your ideas. However, you should have that knowledge available in one place to reassure the skeptics, provide a handy resource for anyone trying to understand your work in greater depth, and paint a coherent picture of how pieces fit together. In a time when more and more people expect us to support our educational decisions with evidence, a well-crafted and well-supported theory of action can meet that need without getting readers lost in a maze of technical language or unavailable research articles and citations.

Over time, an effective theory of action can inform organizational decisions. When new opportunities come our way — a new community partnership, an instructional initiative, an exciting new program — decisions often come down to one of fit. Some opportunities will align with your existing mission, priorities, and strengths. Many do not. Despite the importance of these kind of decisions, leaders often make them from the gut instead of the head, and someone's personal idea of what the organization is about wins the day. This kind of amorphous process often excludes historically marginalized groups or anyone not already at the highest level of power. A properly constructed theory of action can bring important checks and balances to this process if leaders make sure that any proposed action aligns with that theory.

## Theory of action in practice

We both have seen the power a theory of action can have in directing effective organizational change. Abby worked with a set of mid-sized districts in high-poverty rural communities experiencing lower-than-average accountability scores and high teacher turnover rates. A conventional response to this problem might involve recruiting or reassigning the “highest-quality” teachers to these districts. As the districts examined their data, however, leaders discovered they had recruited some of the highest-quality teachers already, but these teachers were not staying. Getting to the crux of this problem prompted some deep conversations with current teachers, district and school leaders, students, parents, and community leaders.

These conversations unlocked some important details. First, some highly qualified and well-meaning educators were coming into these communities, without understanding the local culture and context, with the intent to “fix” the students. Second, despite strong pay incentives and a focus on teacher qualifications, teachers never felt accepted by the community.

Finally, families in the community did not feel respected by teachers from outside the community. But, despite these differences, all the key stakeholders in the system were committed to the goal of helping their students succeed, and this commitment was a valuable asset.

As conversations about these challenges progressed, leaders crafted a theory of action that allowed the local communities to articulate what was important and kept the students at the center of the conversation. Building on the success of their existing educators, leaders agreed that if they could get teachers to better understand and value the culture of their community, those teachers would become more integrated in the community. As a result of the consistency and caring that such integration would provide, students and their

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families and caregivers would feel more trusting of the school and its teachers. Leaders knew they were successful if they saw greater numbers of dedicated, high-quality educators staying and investing in their community.

The theory drove the decision to create a mentoring program for new teachers. While this was not innovative or groundbreaking in and of itself, it was organized in an unusual way that addressed the specific challenges raised in stakeholder conversations. Instead of focusing on merely on the traditional professional development topics like assessment literacy, curriculum enactment, and classroom management, the program drew on the knowledge of key community members and elders familiar with the culture of the community. Together, these community members and the program designers developed a mentoring program that paired new teachers with exceptional teachers from across the state to support their professional practice and with local cultural experts to help the teachers learn about the local community and its values and beliefs.

This type of work is intensive. The program itself took a lot of time and effort in support of just a small percentage of teachers in a state. It required master educators from other schools and districts to be out of their classrooms to support new teachers in these districts. It meant that districts where these new teachers resided needed to find substitutes to allow their educators to visit other classrooms. Finally, it meant facilitators needed to lead teachers and community experts through hard conversations around cultural bias and misunderstanding. Without a theory of action in hand that participants and other stakeholders could come back to, it would have been easy for everyone to walk away and say that the work was too hard or took up too much time. Instead, the program persisted. Within a few years, two communities that had previously experienced new educator attrition rates of 85-100% instead saw 85-100% of new teachers stay in the district.

Because of its theory of action, the program had impacts beyond the two communities where it began. The educators who had participated became some of the biggest advocates for the mentoring program, became embedded in their communities, and began serving as mentors themselves. District leaders became more confident in their ability to plan because they had a more stable teaching force, and the growing percentage of experienced teachers meant there were more faculty members on staff to take on leadership roles. The work garnered interest from others who saw its promise and wanted to help. As a result, the program grew to include an entire set of resources and recordings in which community members shared their cultural knowledge to increase understanding; these resources are now freely available for any educator to use. The mentor teachers said that working with mentee educators and local cultural experts outside their primary districts strengthened their own skills as master educators. All these lessons helped the state secure additional funding to expand the key elements of the work into a statewide mentoring program with wide support from educators and administrators across the state.

## Feeding your mission

Building the theory of action was key to the success of the rural mentoring program. First, it helped challenge existing assumptions about the skills educators needed and the factors that enabled their success. Second, it empowered everyone engaged in the program — the mentor and mentee educators, district leaders, and local community members — to clearly articulate why their work mattered. As the program grew, the theory of action helped those in the program tell its story, understand its success, and leverage that success to grow into a statewide mentoring program with a broad base of support.

Keeping the lights on in any organization takes a lot of work. Understandably, we devote plenty of time and energy to making sure budgets are in order, staff are well-equipped and energized, and day-to-day emergencies are addressed swiftly and tactfully. Nowhere is this truer than in schools, where every day can bring a new set of challenges and every budget is tight. Still, we can't allow the urgency of these demands prevent us from ensuring our mission — why we do what we do — is understood by all stakeholders; kept up-to-date with the ways schools and students have changed; and grounded in strong evidence about

how, where, and why students learn. Having a clear theory of action, rooted in insights from the community, can help leaders stay on track, with everyone moving in the same direction.

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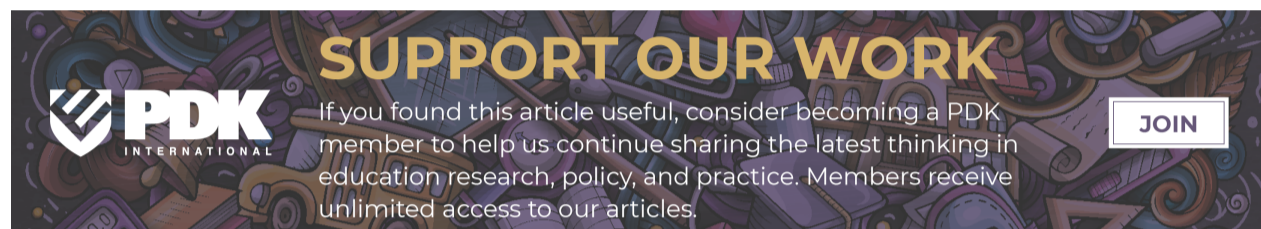
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