



The Building Leadership Team

Great Urban Schools: Learning Together Builds Strong Communities



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
URBAN SCHOOL
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THE MISSION OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

is to partner with Regional Resource Centers to develop powerful networks of urban local education agencies and schools that embrace and implement a data-based, continuous improvement approach for inclusive practices. Embedded within this approach is a commitment to evidence-based practice in early intervention, universal design, literacy and positive behavior supports.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), of the U.S. Department of Education, has funded the NIUSI to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation's urban school districts. NIUSI's creation reflects OSEP's long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.



sharing leadership

What is a Building Leadership Team?

A Building Leadership Team (BLT) is a school-based group of individuals who work to provide strong organizational process for school renewal and improvement. BLTs orchestrate the work of school professionals, administrators, families, and students through the school improvement process. This process includes the examination of current, successful practices and also those areas that are of concern to the school community. In addition, BLTs plan for progress, achievement, and risk.

Team leadership helps to facilitate rapid and sustained change. Often, circumstances such as high turnover, classroom isolation, and limited executive authority make it difficult for schools to make the decisions needed for improvement. Leadership teams, then can provide a context for decision making. The use of BLTs emphasizes the need for clear sanction and participation from other school staff, reasonable delegation of responsibility and authority from the district office and board, and resources for the team's work.

The BLT meets regularly through-

out the school year to ensure that both planning for school improvement and the implementation of those plans is on course. When necessary, the BLT works to develop or change building policies so that policies, procedures, and activities work together to support the work of educators and students. BLTs are responsible for collecting data in order to identify topics and processes for professional development. They help keep the focus on a few specific targets and work with the building principal to assure that administrative structures support the instructional program.

Do BLTs replace principals?

Principals are like conductors. They can't make music without their musicians but they lead the process of performing. Principals are responsible to the central administration and ultimately to the School Board to ensure that the policies and processes established for the district as a whole are implemented in their buildings. They must assure that the safety and security of students and staff alike are maintained. Principals are accountable for

the overall academic achievement of all learners in their building. Evaluation and mentoring of school professionals in the building is a vital and time-consuming part of each principal's role. Because of these responsibilities, the principal plays a critical role in shaping the agendas for each building leadership team.

What's the commitment?

BLT members are committing themselves to the equivalent of about an hour and a half per week of meeting time. Meetings may occur weekly, every other week, or when a team is well-established monthly. BLT members are also committing themselves to work completed between meetings. In addition, the BLT will have at least one retreat at the beginning of each year to establish a working plan. Teams may also choose to meet at the end of the year to assess progress and complete an annual review of progress. BLT members will have the opportunity to network with other school BLTs via electronic mail and face-to-face at conferences and meetings.



building the team

Who should be a member?

Membership on the team should be diverse. You'll want to consider students, practitioners, family and community members, and administrative staff. Because a leadership team must be sustainable over time, consider staggering the terms for members, thus ensuring a smoother transition for new members and less disruption to the team's work. Ensure that as many people as possible of selecting members for the team.

Decide on a process for how members are selected or nominated for the team. These questions should be considered:

- At the elementary level, is each grade level represented?
- How are special included?
- At the secondary level, should members represent teams? Content area? Grade level?
- Do parents represent the diversity present in the school community (i.e., second language learners)?
- Will students directly participate or will there be a process to include their voices in decision making?

Who does what?

Part of "building the team" is sharing the responsibilities that accompany the running of any meeting.

The following are process roles that the team might find helpful to the overall efficiency of a meeting (these jobs are often rotated):

- Facilitator: Guides the meeting

process and remains objective.

- Timekeeper: Keeps track of how much time has been spent on an issue. Advises group when time allotted for an agenda item is up. Helps to ensure equitable floor time for speakers.
- Scribe: Takes notes.
- Doorkeeper: Sits near the door and fills in latecomers with the current status of the meeting and what has been discussed so far.
- Temperature taker: Monitors how the group is responding to each other.

What is the purpose of a BLT?

Part of building the team is helping people focus on outcomes. Revisiting these purposes and outcomes periodically provides the opportunity to reassess team processes. Each team establishes its purpose. Some possibilities are listed below:

- Provides leadership for setting school targets and accomplishments and presents evidence to central administration of the plan for school improvement each year.
- Organizes workgroups that will accomplish tasks related to school improvement.
- Insures that the building engages in a variety of evaluation tasks—those that help determine the goals, those that help in inform progress and change, and those that benchmark success (i.e., student achievement, school climate, etc.).

- Based on data, determines the areas of need and provides leadership for professional development within the building, take leadership for ensuring that the entire building (staff, parents, community members, and students) become a learning community.
- Understands and works within the policies and guidelines of the district.

What can members expect?

As a team member, you can expect:

- Own solutions and not just problems.
- Challenge the way things are.
- Reach out to unexpected constituencies.
- Be willing to learn, change, take another's perspective.
- See your role and the role of your team as a part of a larger ecosystem.
- Understand the change will bring unexpected side effects—try to anticipate the ripple effects of change.
- Understand the system that you work in.
- Understand the strengths that you and your team members bring to the work.
- Assume a role of collaborative leadership.
- Avoid negativity—this is not an event but a new way of working with others.
- Empower yourself.



making meetings productive

Why set an agenda?

Remember that people have limited amounts of time. At the beginning of the meeting, set time limits for each item. It will be important for BLTs to have time to make decisions as well as dialogue. Some members of your team will disengage unless the team accomplishes its agenda. Remember to create agendas together. Make sure that everyone gets an opportunity to place items on the agenda and that these items are legitimized through discussion and actions. Rotate the responsibility for convening meetings and the role each member plays at the meeting. Post the agenda at least a day before the meeting as a reminder to your team members. Label items on the agenda as informational, discussion, and/or action. Ensure that the principal has a time slot on the agenda for announcements. A sample agenda can be found in the appendix.

What are the norms?

People who work together need to be explicit about a set of norms for their work, since people have differing sets of expectations and skills for meetings. Not everyone feels comfortable in these formalized structures, so new groups often lean towards informality to ease the comfort level of the participants. As a result, meetings may not be as productive as they need to be to sustain the group over time. It is important to have a conversation among your team members early on to establish a way of working together. Some norms might include using written and verbal input, keeping minutes, sharing limited time to talk by creating time limits for contributors, being on time, and having a process

to inform team members who must miss a meeting. Another item to discuss might be how to offer solutions rather than critique the worth of others' contributions.

How should a meeting be facilitated?

Adhering to formalized meeting procedures builds a strong, productive team. Teams will need to decide on several factors, one of which is designating a facilitator or chairperson. This position can be delegated to one person, shared by two team members, or shared among the group. The responsibilities of a facilitator might include the following: guiding the team through the agenda, keeping the agenda rolling, recognizing obstacles and assisting with the decision-making process. Finally, be sure to end your meetings on time!

How do we encourage productive dialogue?

Productive dialogue is essential to effective team meetings. Some ideas include using round robins (asking each individual to offer up to a two-minute opinion on the subject) to tie up discussions. You can also ask people to write down their top three ideas on a topic so the no one's ideas are lost. In a group of 10 or more people, you might ask pairs to dialogue about an issue for two minutes and share their merged ideas with the group. Make sure that the questions that elicit discussion require more than yes or no answers. For instance, "To what extent are our students feeling supported by the faculty?" Rather than "Are our students feeling supported by the faculty?" Ask them to reflect on what they are learning. Periodically, take the time to summarize a conversation.

How do we accomplish the work?

Take the time in your retreats to plan ahead, assigning specific tasks and time lines. The group can arrive at consensus on these activities. Then, your frequent meetings can provide an opportunity for status reports (information items) and decision making based on the work of small workgroups. Build your calendar of activities on at least a semester-by-semester basis. Make sure that the roles and responsibilities of each group member are spelled out (facilitator, decision taker, convener, etc). Ask for status reports by activity at each of your meetings. Make sure that the tasks that you work on have buy-in from your whole group. Document your decisions so that team members have access to them. An Activity Planner is included in the appendix. This document is designed to help keep targets in focus.

How do we handle the minutes?

Minutes are important artifacts that help the team keep track of decisions, discussions, and topics. They should be kept for each meeting and reviewed at subsequent meetings.

Post the decisions of your last meeting in a conspicuous place, such as right in front of your building's copy machine(s). Post when and where the next meeting will occur. Remind faculty about your meeting at least two days before it is held.

Use the print and e-mail to keep your faculty and staff informed. Make sure that BLT members have a venue to share information from the BLT meeting. This could be in the form of a grade-level team meeting, where meeting minutes could help remind people of the work done.



decision-making processes

How do we assure Collaborative decision-making?

Decisions made by Building Leadership Teams should represent the collective judgment of the school community. Each member of the BLT has a responsibility to act as the voice for group of stakeholders they may represent. Collaborative decision making allows for each team member to state their views. Consensus is reached after thoroughly discussing the problem or issue and represents the best decision of the group as a whole. The results of this process are that members must agree to live with the decision of the group and commit to carrying out the decision or solution.

How can we reach consensus?

A consensus decision is either unanimous or a majority decision that the entire team, including dissenters, will work to implement. Steps to assist the team with reaching consensus include:

- Define and Clarify problem or topic
- Determine who will be impacted by decision
- Gather information, including feedback from those who will be affected
- Discuss problem or topic, generating alternative solutions
- Discuss differences and agreements
- Make the Decision
- Determine an Evaluation Process
- Implement the Decision

Typically, BLT members will find that they have little difficulty reaching

consensus when all of the decision-making steps are followed. There may be occasion, however, when conflict arises during the process.

How do we honor dissent?

Periodically, teams may experience times when a decision cannot be reached and resolution is delayed. If the team is unable to reach consensus on an issue after a period of time, several options or concessions may be considered by teams.

These include:

- Use a neutral, third party to facilitate through the impasse record
- Post dissenting viewpoints in the minutes
- Determine a probationary term to test implementation of the decision

When is voting appropriate?

Most people are familiar with the use of the democratic method of decision making. Voting can set up teams to take sides. The result may be resistance to implementing decisions that a few individuals do not agree with. There are times, however, when voting can expedite consensus decision making. Early in the stages of problem solving, voting may be used to narrow choices. These decisions are made according to the vote of the majority of a pre-determined percentage of BLT members.

What is an example of decision making?

Initial school profile information col-

lected by Crest Middle School indicates that over the past three years, there has been a significant increase in student tardiness. Two work groups from the Building Leadership Team have been involved in collecting in-depth information from students, teachers, administrators and parents about the issue of tardiness and compiling the latest research on best practices and effectiveness of interventions. The data collection work group found that teachers consequences tardiness in different ways. Student information suggested that several classroom clocks were off by a few minutes, which was problematic when moving from a class where the time was off to one that was set differently. The research practices work group shared several strategies, including, hall monitors, cueing students with a short bell when there are only two minutes left to hall passing, and hall "sweep". After discussing the possible reasons behind the increasing tardiness, BLT members discussed the pros and cons of each strategy shared by the researched practices work group. The team came to consensus on three decisions: 1) a tardy policy needed to be developed for all teachers to follow; 2) this policy would be reviewed by students and parents for input; and 3) a two-minute warning bell would be sounded toward the end of the each passing period. The BLT set up a time line of one quarter to determine if implementation of these strategies worked or would need revising.



working important topics

How do we create a plan for the first six months of work?

In order to maintain the focus for the team's work, it is important to create a plan that lays out the BLT's work in six-month increments. This helps to ensure a number of things:

- Timely planning for upcoming projects/data collection, etc.
- Delegation of responsibility to a broad selection of team members
- Efficient use of team members' time
- A structure from which to maintain the team's focus.
- The Path Process has been used with schools to plan for systemic change. This planning is included in the appendix.

How to keep on track?

Several ways to help keep people on track are:

- Honor individuals for any good deed, action, or contribution. Pay attention to each team

member's work.

- Keep the focus of the meeting on agenda items by adhering to the norms set by the group.
- Honor people's commitment by beginning and ending meetings on time.
- Revisit the goals and outcomes regularly.
- Watch for unexpressed issues and feelings.
- Look for who is speaking and who is not.
- Ask for contributions from silent members.

How to commit to homework?

Depending on how often the BLT meets, it is likely that some work will need to be done outside of meeting times. This might include data collection, data analysis, reports, readings, etc. BLT members need to ensure that homework or additional duties do not encumber members, while at the same time acknowledging that time outside

the regular school day may be required of the team.

How to remember your constituencies?

Keeping the school staff and community informed about that decisions and activities of the BLT are critical to maintaining and enhancing its leadership role. To that extent, it is important to develop a feedback loop that keeps constituencies informed.

The following questions may help focus how your team accomplishes this:

- What process will team members use to communicate BLT decisions to the rest of the faculty?
- How will input be sought from others, including school personnel and community members?
- To what degree will there be student involvement?



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