



*A Union of Professionals*

## **AFT Suggested Checklist for Ensuring a Fair and Effective School Improvement Process**

The following checklist summarizes the elements of the school improvement process (identification of a school, analysis of the school's problems, identification and selection of solutions, implementation of research-proven solutions), and provides a set of criteria to ensure that the process is fair--and effective. Although the specific procedures developed by various locales will differ, we believe this checklist can serve as a useful guide.

### **I. Identifying Schools**

Initial identification of schools as low performing should be made using fair and widely accepted criteria. The process should not stop there, however. School systems must not only identify which schools are failing, but also understand why.

**1. The indicators by which low-performing schools are identified should be fair and objective.** (For a suggested list of initial indicators, see "Indicators of Low-Performing Schools.")

**2. All Stakeholders --including staff, students, and parents--should know and understand the criteria by which the school's performance is being judged.**

**3. When problems are identified, schools and stakeholders should be informed promptly given access to supporting data, and told if an audit or improvement plan is being considered.**

### **II. Conducting a School Self-Study**

After a school is identified as being in need of serious corrective action, the school and its governing authority should initiate an investigatory process. Both internal (self-studies) and external school audits should try to answer two questions: *Why isn't the school "working"? What can be done to help it improve?*

The following are suggested guidelines for conducting a self-study and a set of questions to be addressed in the process. (For more detail, see "The School Audit.")

#### **A. Guidelines for Conducting a Self-Study**

The following is a list of areas that should be examined during the self-study: instruction; curriculum; assessment; school management and leadership; professional qualifications and professional development of staff, parent, and community involvement; school discipline, safety and security; instructional supplies and materials; the physical plant and facilities; and the adequacy of the district's support for the schools. At a minimum, an effective self-study process should address the four general areas outlined below.

- 1. An accurate school profile should be developed, including test score data, dropout figures, student demographics, etc.**
- 2. The factors that promote effective schools should be reviewed, and a measure of their presence or absence in the school should be made.**
- 3. The effectiveness of the school's compliance with federal, state, and district mandates should be reviewed.**
- 4. After reviewing all available information, school staff should decide which problems need to be addressed most urgently, as well as to determine the school's long-term goals.**

## B. Suggested Questions for a Self-Study

Only a few key questions are highlighted below. In general, the questions should elicit enough information to diagnose the causes of low student achievement, and to suggest remedies. The self-study should offer school staff the opportunity to communicate their own analysis of what works and what needs to be improved in the school.

- 1. Based upon a review of the school's standing on state and district "key performance indicators," what are the major problem areas?**
- 2. Have there been any recent demographic shifts that might account for a decline in achievement levels?**
- 3. Does the school have clear academic standards that are known to all students and staff? Does the school have high expectations for all students? Does it have the core curriculum and programs in place that could help students meet the expectations? Does the school have well-designed assessments that can detect problems before students fall too far behind?**
- 4. What programs and procedures does the school have to help struggling students? Are they effective?**
- 5. Does the school have well-defined and enforced standards of conduct?**
- 6. Has the school been engaged in prior improvement efforts? To what end?**
- 7. Do school managers help promote academic excellence? Do they work to maintain an orderly and collegial atmosphere?**
- 8. Do faculty members (teachers and classroom paraprofessionals) play an active decision-making role in efforts to achieve academic excellence?**
- 9. Does the school provide adequate opportunities for professional development? Does the school's personnel policy work to attract and retain a qualified and experienced teaching force?**
- 10. Does the school effectively engage parents and the community in efforts to achieve excellence in the school?**

**11. Are there sufficient resources to support high standards of conduct and achievements? Do the district and school provide adequate support for the effective implementation of district, state and federally mandated education programs?**

**12. What are the main factors that have contributed to the school's lack of academic success? Describe and discuss ways in which these factors could be reduced or eliminated.**

### III. Conducting an External School Audit

The information and analysis provided by the school self-study should help to guide an external school audit team which, at the completion of its work, will be in a position to recommend actions that should be taken to improve the school. The external audit team should include staff representatives.

The following checklist should help you to determine whether the external school audit process is fair and effective. (For more detail, see "The School Audit.")

#### **1. The school audit should be conducted in a collaborative and constructive manner.**

- a. Teachers and other school staff should be included on the audit planning and implementation teams.
- b. Representatives of teachers and other school staff should be involved in all aspects of the audit.
- c. The external school audit report should be approved by a majority vote of the team.
- d. Other members of the school community, including students and parents, should be involved appropriately in the process.
- e. The district (and the state) should make a clear commitment to provide the resources necessary to support the improvement plan arising from the audit process.

#### **2. The audit process should be well designed and implemented.**

- a. A detailed manual (or equivalent set of documents) should guide the school improvement process.
- b. All participants in the process should receive an adequate orientation.
- c. Sufficient time should be allocated for the completion of all required tasks.
- d. The focus of the study should be on identifying the school's specific as well as general problems.
- e. Adequate attention should be paid to finding appropriate solutions to the identified problems.

**3. The audit should examine all aspects of the school's operation to determine the reasons for its problems.**

- a. Factors beyond the school's control, such as low levels of financial support and lack of professional development opportunities in the district, should be taken into account when determining why the school has not achieved academic success.
- b. The school should be judged using widely accepted criteria for identifying the causes of academic failure.
- c. The adequacy of the school district's and state's prior support for the school's needs should be evaluated.

**4. The rights of school staff and students should be protected during the course of the school audit.**

- a. The audit process should respect the rights to privacy and confidentiality of all students and school staff.
- b. The audit should focus on improving the entire school, not on passing judgment on the individual performance or competence of teachers or other school staff.

**5. The audit team's recommended improvement plan should be effective in addressing the school's most pressing problems.**

- a. The specific problems confronting the school--such as a weak reading program, an inadequate bilingual education program, poor student discipline--should be identified.
- b. The literature on research-proven programs should be investigated for possible solutions.

## IV. Selecting an Improvement Program

Once a school's strengths, weaknesses, and most pressing needs have been identified, the staff should seek solutions from among those replicable, research-based programs that have a record of success in similar situations.

The following guidelines suggest a process for voting for change, and "opt-out" procedures for any staff members who choose not to accept the decision of their peers. (For more detail, see "Selecting an Improvement Program.")

### A. Voting for Change

**1. Staff members should be provided with enough information to make an informed choice from among research-based improvement models.**

- a. Faculty members should be furnished with accurate information about research results, costs, and any additional professional development, curriculum materials or other assistance that might be necessary for the faithful implementation of each program.

b. Presentations on the programs under consideration should address the specific needs of the school, use data and examples to illustrate how the program can help raise student achievement, and provide a realistic description of what a faithful implementation would involve.

c. Staff representatives should be provided opportunities to make site visits to school sites where the programs under consideration are being implemented.

**2. Staff should choose by secret ballot.**

**3. Programs should be adopted by a "super-majority" vote.**

## B. "Opt-Out" Procedures

**1. Faculty who wish to opt out of the program should be offered transfer opportunities.**

**2. In addition to the opportunity to transfer out, districts should consider recruiting teams of "master teachers" for the target schools who have training and experience in the selected model.**

## V. Implementing Change

Throughout the implementation process, administrators must keep in mind that according to the evidence on organizational reform, programmatic change is most successful when it meets these conditions:

**1. To increase the likelihood that the best results will be achieved, schools should be allowed to fully and faithfully implement all of the key elements of the research-based school improvement models.**

**2. School staff should be provided with all of the professional development, materials, and support that they need to make the program work.**