

Winter 2022




VAI's Admin Guide

Roadmap for Successful School
Improvement Planning
2022-2023

aaron.braunschneider@vaei.org
www.vaei.org

"Vision without action is daydream. Action without vision is nightmare."

—Japanese Proverb



We all know the adage, “Better to measure twice and cut once.” This bit of wisdom has been passed down for more than 450 years. In fact, it seems to have even been diluted over time, with original versions of the idiom suggesting to measure seven times before cutting! But I digress. The point is, centuries of history tell us that planning is critically important to success.

Fast forward to modern times, and it’s clear that having a good plan, particularly for something as important and complex as school improvement, is essential. By having a well thought out school improvement plan, you gain:

Heightened Awareness of Progress

Most major accomplishments are made up of a series of uneventful, even mundane, steps along the way. If you’re a parent, consider that you make your kids’ lunch; you drive them to school; you ask about their homework, and then BAM! One day you find yourself watching them receive their high school diploma! Your school improvement goals are the same. Having a plan that lays out the final goal, and the action items needed to achieve it, will help you acknowledge and celebrate successes along the way.

Clearer Communication with Stakeholders

Let’s face it. You can’t do this alone. (Or if you can, then your goals aren’t big enough, which is another paper!) Making the most out of the time and resources you have to achieve tangible improvements in your school will require collaboration with your teachers and staff as well as education partners and community members. You’ll need their support, so you need their buy-in. A clear and succinct plan will help others align with your vision, support your efforts, and even empower them to take action on your behalf.

Better Decision Making

You and your staff are met with hundreds of decisions every day. Having a document that lays out a clear vision, strategy, and plan offers guideposts that you can reference back to for sound decision making. This helps you avoid inadvertently making contradictory decisions and/or uninformed decisions.

Increased Likelihood of Success

The most important benefit of having a plan is that, quite simply, you’re not nearly as likely to succeed without one. Dr. Gail Matthews, a psychology professor at Dominican University, conducted a study in 2015 showing that people are 42% more likely to achieve their goals when they write them down. So, as time-consuming as it might be, developing a thoughtful, comprehensive, actionable, and realistic school improvement plan is time well spent. Your students, your staff, and your community deserve the best chance at success. And you deserve the opportunity to clearly define what success looks like in the building(s) you support.

Now that you're excited about school improvement planning (humor me!), here are 7 strategies to make your 2022-23 school improvement plan as successful as possible.

1

Don't Act Like Everything's Normal

This goes without saying, yet it's too important not to say. Educators had a positively traumatic end to the 2019-20 school year, found themselves in a constant state of adaptation in the 2020-21 school year, and entered 2021-22 with a false sense of optimism, almost willing it to be a normal school year. It didn't take long to realize that it wasn't. In fact, this year has quickly surpassed the stress of 2020-21 and has brought our teachers and administrators to the brink. Teaching looks nothing like what anyone could have imagined just a few years ago. Planning for 2022-2023 will need to be different as well.

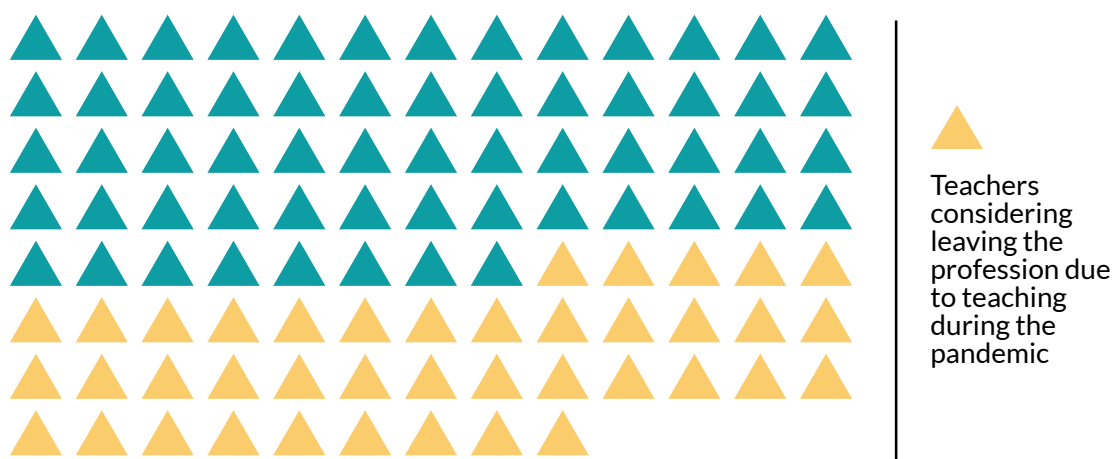
Most teachers have made heroic and honorable attempts to not only maximize learning but also to attend to the social-emotional needs of their students during such a taxing time. But it has taken its toll. No matter how great your school culture and climate may be, chances are teacher morale is at an all-time low.

[EducationWeek's September 2021 article](#) highlights the undeniable effects the pandemic is continuing to have on our teachers. According to a national survey conducted in July 2021 by the EdWeek Research Center, 60% of teachers feel job-related stress most of the time or always. Or, just take a look at social media: the types of comments that are pervasive among Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok are alarming school and district leaders. After all, teacher well-being has a direct effect on students' well-being. Research shows that among school related factors, [teachers matter the most](#) to student achievement. And high levels of teacher stress can lead to [lower student outcomes](#). So, it's in all of our best interests to offer support for teachers during this difficult year.

What does this have to do with school improvement planning? Well, before you even begin to think about planning for next year, your teachers need to know that you understand where they are now. If they don't feel supported now, low morale, and the negative impact that has on students can multiply.

"Kids, especially adolescents, are feeling demoralized and disconnected," said Patricia Jennings, an education professor at the University of Virginia who studies teacher stress. "To have a teacher feeling those same feelings—it just reinforces it. When people are feeling discouraged, it can be contagious."

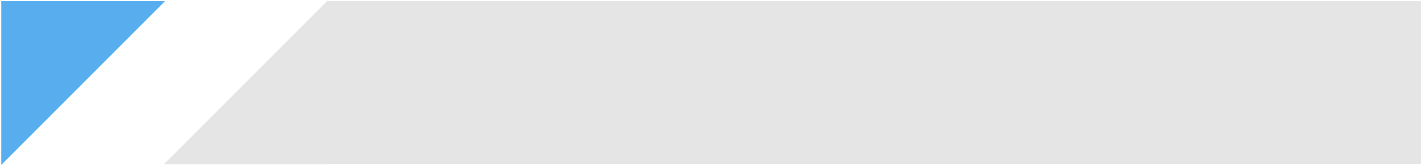
In addition, teachers are leaving the profession, and with teacher shortages continuing to make national news, you need to do everything you can to keep your talent to bring your school improvement vision to life. According to [recent NEA surveys](#), nearly 4 in 10 teachers reported that they were considering leaving the teaching profession due to working during the pandemic. Additionally, [RAND Corporation](#) reported that 1 in 4 teachers were likely to leave teaching at the end of the 2020-2021 school year, whereas in years prior to the pandemic, one in six were considering the change. So what can you do? How can you make sure that you are creating a school culture of high satisfaction and retention?



How You Can Help

Value Time

- **Prioritize and protect planning time.** Above all else, this is the most important thing you can do for your teachers. Treat both teaching and planning time as sacred. Make sure they have time to plan individually as well as collaboratively with colleagues.
- **Cut back.** Look for any testing, data analysis, paperwork, or other non-teaching tasks that can be taken off their plate. If it's in your control, cut it back. If it's out of your control, make a case for cutting it back. Teachers will feel seen and heard just knowing that you are advocating for them.
- **Take over a class.** You're busy, too, but whenever you can, as often as you can, step in and teach a class for a teacher. This gift of time will mean the world to them.
- **Have fewer, shorter meetings.** Scrutinize the value of your own meetings. 'Because it's on the calendar' is a terrible reason for a meeting. Ask yourself: Can the content be covered in an email? Do we need a full hour for this?

- 
- **Make meetings virtual or asynchronous.** Whenever possible, allow flexibility in when and how teachers access a meeting, especially if it's before or after school hours.
 - **Hire permanent subs.** Eliminate the stress of finding subs last minute; use ESSER funds to hire enough permanent subs to cover typical daily outages.
 - **Use paraprofessionals.** Instead of asking teachers to cover lunch or bus duty, tap into paraprofessionals, giving teachers more time for planning and teaching.
 - **Hire high school students.** Hold a job fair and allow high school students to apply for vacancies in your cafeteria, custodial, or other departments.
 - **Hire administrative help.** If teachers are spending time on clerical work, hire an administrative assistant to ease this burden.
 - **End classes early 1 day a week.** Some schools around the country are taking more drastic measures to find time. For example, ending school 2 hours early every Wednesday for the rest of this school year.
 - **Teach 4 days a week.** Some have reverted to a 4-day school week, making 1 day a week virtual or eliminating classes altogether 1 day a week.

Show Respect

- **Compensate.** With ESSER funds, schools have access to more funds than they have had in living memory. Use this money to show teachers you respect their time, effort, and expertise. Pay more for subs, offer sign-on bonuses, retention bonuses, and raises. Offer teachers extra pay for extra responsibilities or extra time.
- **Spread the burden.** Don't lean on the same "volunteers" all the time. It's tempting because there are teachers that you can always count on, that genuinely want to be helpful, but you need to protect them even more.
- **Ask for and act upon feedback.** Survey teachers (anonymously or not) to ask them what they need. You might be surprised by how simple it is to meet their needs. But do ACT upon the information you receive. Even if it's to explain why something can't be done.
- **No new initiatives.** This may not be the time to implement district-wide or even school-wide major changes. Let things lie a bit. Don't add to the problem.
- **Ask them to lead a PD session.** Your teachers have learned a ton over the last year and a half. Some of them have found success. Tell them you're impressed. Ask them if they'd like to share with others.
- **Don't micromanage.** Are you reviewing lesson plans you don't need to? Are you nit-picking in observations? Just check yourself and make sure you're giving teachers as much autonomy as you can.

- **Don't punish the group for issues of a few.** When issues of performance arise, take issue with the actual offenders. Don't lecture the whole staff or put in place policies that negatively impact the whole group.
- **Notice and acknowledge student progress.** Teachers are hard on themselves this year. They are as frustrated as anyone that students aren't progressing at the rate they'd like. Help them see any and all progress; celebrate it with them; encourage them to take pride in any student progress.
- **Be clear about priorities.** Respect teachers enough to share with them (or include them in deciding) the instructional priorities for the upcoming year. [Use this Standards Scoring Sheet](#) to identify your power standards.
- **Be visible to school and community.** If you spend most of your day in your office, teachers, students, and the community will see you as out of touch. Make yourself available to them. Be present and visible as a sign of your respect.
- **Attend PD sessions.** If it's important enough for teachers to be there, it's important enough for you to be there as well. Appreciate the time they are taking to develop themselves professionally by attending the sessions yourself.
- **Be vulnerable.** With respect comes trust. Trust your teachers with your authentic thoughts and emotions.

Provide Support

- **Move out from behind desk.** When teachers come to talk, move from behind your desk to a table or set of chairs. Changing from your "normal" work environment signals to them that you are attentive and listening without distraction.
- **Encourage a confidant.** Urge teachers to find one or two safe people they can talk to, ideally another teacher who understands the unique challenges they both face.
- **Hire a licensed professional counselor (LPC).** Schools are taking the mental health of their staff and students more seriously than ever. Some are even hiring a professional counselor to be on staff at the school.
- **Check for an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Ask your human resources department if your district's benefits include an EAP. Many employers offer these, and they often include up to five free counseling sessions for employees.
- **Call it "life-work balance."** Sometimes just a switch in semantics can signal that you value teachers as people and understand that their life is more important than their work.

- **Give tools to support their emotional well-being.** Encourage staff to track their moods with this [Mental Health Tracker](#), which offers a visual format that is quick to log and interpret. Or give them this [Avoiding Burnout Checklist and Reflection Form](#) to help them proactively look for signs of burnout while providing practical tips to prevent and/or recover.
- **Use art to elicit mental health discussions.** Give teachers the prompt: Draw a symbol to represent you and where you are on your journey. Give staff 2 minutes to draw, then ask them to share as appropriate. Asking for a “symbol” eases any pressure to be artistically accurate, and the sharing often uncovers insights into teachers’ mental health.
- **Remind one another of their unique value.** Have each staff member write their name on a piece of paper and tape it on a wall around the room. Ask everyone to go around to each paper and write what they value about that person. When done, return to your paper and share out any observations or surprises. Encourage staff when feeling stressed to tap into the qualities noted on their paper. (This can be done virtually with links on a google doc or with padlet.)

Express Gratitude

Warning: Implementing anything from this list without implementing actions from the previous lists may backfire. Seriously, don't do that.

- **Hand-written notes.** Give a teacher a hand-written note; you know it will make their day.
- **Say thank you.** This one is so easy, yet how often do we forget? Just make sure you say thank you. Not just for the extra tasks, but for showing up and giving their best to their students on any given day.
- **Sticky notes.** Place a sticky note with some nice words where a teacher is sure to find it. To ensure everyone gets this boost of encouragement, allot an amount of time (a month, for example), and place all staff names on a day for that month. Each morning, check your calendar and distribute sticky notes to the staff you’ve assigned for that day.
- **Smile knowingly.** Don’t walk through the halls with a pasted, fake grin. Instead, when you pass your colleagues in the halls, give them that genuine smile that says, “I know it’s hard; I see you; I appreciate you.” They can tell the difference.

- **Surprise gifts.** Sometimes teachers just need one tiny bright spot to lift the mood of their whole day. Ask them for their favorite guilty pleasure that's under \$5. Maybe it's a gourmet cupcake or maybe it's a vanilla latte. Periodically surprise staff with that thing that makes them uniquely smile.
- **Relax the dress code.** Honestly, with recruitment as hard as it is, you may want to relax the dress code permanently, but if you do have a 'no jeans' policy or other dress code policy that you know teachers roll their eyes at, now's the time to ditch it—at least for a day, if not for good.
- **Walk around and distribute popcorn.** The smell of fresh popcorn wafting from the halls and then hand delivered to their room is sure to boost their spirits. (Don't burn it. Don't be that guy.)
- **Bring them an apple.** Sure, it's cheesy, but most teachers love a little extra cheesy in their lives. Bringing them an apple hits on two levels: it's a healthy snack, and it's a subtle reminder of why they got into teaching in the first place.
- **Bring in a food truck.** How excited would your teachers be to see a coffee or dessert food truck outside the school? Making such a grand gesture is a great way to express gratitude.
- **Solicit help from parents.** Ask parents to share a positive note or even bring a meal to a teacher. One teacher told us that a parent brought her a meal and it moved her to tears!
- **Leverage your community.** Your community wants to help. Ask local businesses (restaurants, spas, community centers, gyms, memberships, etc.) to offer teacher discounts or freebies. Teachers love a deal, so scoring just a few of these could make their day. Also, you can share this [Ultimate List of Stores](#) that lists national chain stores that offer teacher discounts.

2

Recognize that Administrators and Teachers View School Improvement Plans Differently

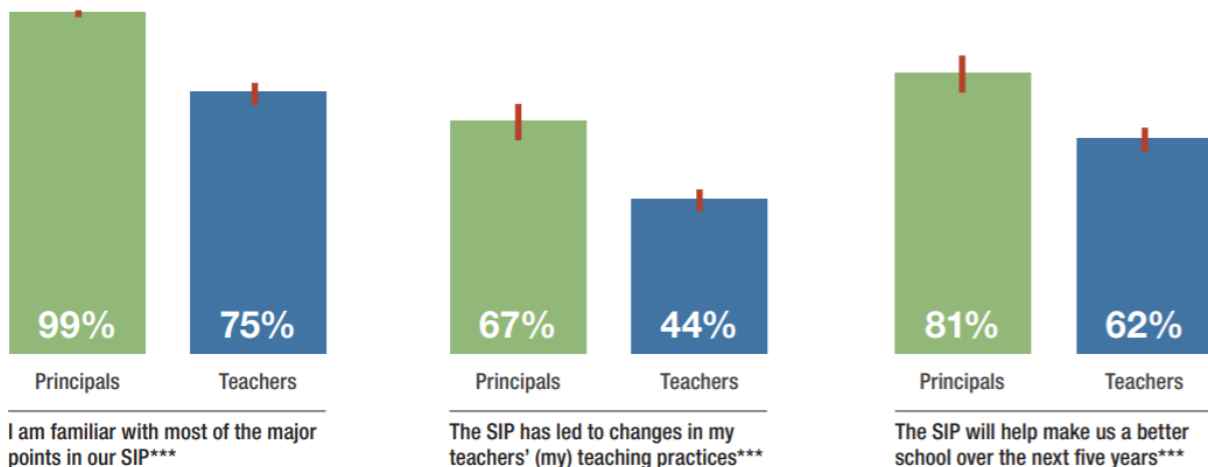
Once you are tending to your teachers in the here and now, use that understanding to frame your 2022–2023 planning mindset. The first thing you need to realize is that administrators and teachers view School Improvement Plans (SIPs) very differently. A [2018 RAND Survey Report](#) explores teacher and principal awareness of, and attitudes toward, SIPs.

The report shows that while both teachers and principals may be familiar with their schools' SIPs, they have differing levels of buy-in. A full 99% of principals said they are familiar with most of the major points in their SIPs, while 75% of teachers said the same. When asked if the SIP has led to changes in teaching practices, 67% of principals agreed that it had. Less than half of the teachers, only 44%, felt the same way. And when it comes to belief in the success of a SIP, there are similar discrepancies. 81% of principals said the SIP would help make their school better over the next five years, while only 62% of teachers felt it would have that same impact.

FIGURE 1

Both Teachers and Principals Are Familiar with Their SIPs, Have Different Buy-In Levels

Percentages of Educators Agreeing with Statements Concerning SIPs



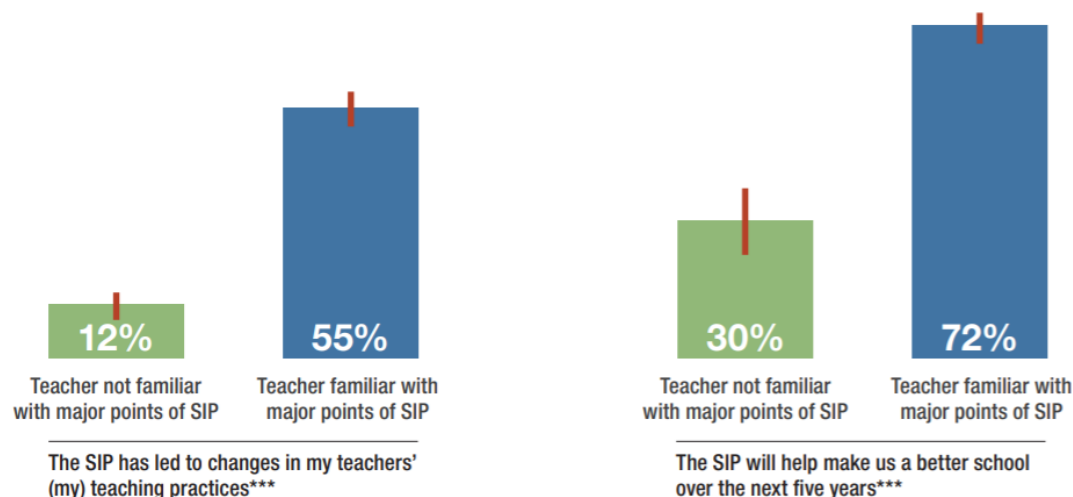
NOTE: Vertical bars represent weighted 95-percent confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among teachers and school leaders: *** $p < 0.001$.

Drilling down into these questions a bit more yields more telling insights. The greatest divergence in answers between principals and teachers came when looking at feelings about the SIP as they relate to teacher familiarity with the plan itself.

Only 12% of teachers who were not familiar with the key points of the SIP reported a change in their teaching practices, while 55% of teachers who were familiar with the key points of the SIP reported a change in their teaching practices. Similarly divergent, while 72% of teachers who were familiar with major points of the SIP felt the plan would help make the school better over the next five years, only 30% of teachers not familiar with the major points of the SIP felt the same way.

FIGURE 2

Percentages of Teachers Agreeing with Statements on the Effects of SIPs, by Familiarity with the SIP



NOTE: Vertical bars represent weighted 95-percent confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among teachers and school leaders: *** $p < 0.001$.

Key Take-Aways

- **A lack of teacher familiarity with the SIP is perhaps the most significant impediment to a successful SIP.** Surprisingly, this is one of the easiest things to remedy. Making sure teachers understand (or better yet are involved in the creation of) the SIP must be a priority if you want your SIP to be successfully implemented.
- **If teachers are familiar with the SIP, almost three quarters of them feel positively about its potential to improve the school.** It's heartening to know that this discrepancy isn't a fundamentally irrevocable cynicism teachers have against administrators or school improvement planning in general. This shows that if they are familiar with the points, they are not only more likely to change their own practices, but they are also potential advocates in support of your plan among their peers and the community.
- **Administrators need to be mindful of the inherently differing perspectives between themselves and their teachers.** Even if you feel you've communicated your SIP clearly and effectively, it's good to be mindful of these discrepant viewpoints and not have it become a blind spot for you.

3

Follow a Process

COVID-19 has upended education in many ways, but the school improvement planning process is more relevant than ever, so don't feel like you have to reinvent it. You might seek new inputs; you might have new priorities; you might have steeper hurdles to overcome in meeting your goals, but the basic planning steps hold. For a thorough look at the process, here's Hanover Research's [best practices for school improvement planning](#). But basically, if you follow this six-step plan, you should have your bases covered.

Step-by-Step School Improvement Planning



Start with a vision.

Consider what a successful school (or district) means to you. This isn't as easy as it sounds. There are endless buzzwords and mission statements to choose from to create something that sounds catchy, but fleshing that out into a clear and succinct vision is tough. But if your vision isn't clear, then your plan is likely doomed before it begins. Challenge yourself to capture your vision in a one-page visual. Very few people will read your entire plan end to end, but most everyone that picks it up will remember a graphic or image that cleanly and clearly articulates a compelling vision.

Conduct a needs analysis.

You need data to make informed decisions and to allocate your resources and efforts in the smartest way possible. Once you have your vision, consider what aspects of your school contribute to that vision. Then give each of those aspects a thorough assessment to see what's working well and what can be improved.

Pro tip: rely on partners who specialize in certain areas to help conduct these assessments. This can help you avoid unintended biases and offer insights you might not have thought of. For example, if enhancing the effectiveness of teacher instruction is critical to your vision, use this [free needs analysis survey](#) to help you assess teacher effectiveness not only in specific content areas, but also areas such as inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, instructional strategies, classroom culture, and professional growth.





Identify goals based on needs.

With a clear picture of your greatest areas of need, identify goals that squarely address those needs. Aim for a reasonable number of goals that are rigorous, but achievable. Avoid broad goals that sound good generally, but can't clearly tie back to a demonstrated need that aligns to your vision. Holding to that guideline will keep you and your team focused throughout the goal-setting process.



Outline action steps.

For each goal, consider what needs to happen in order for that goal to be accomplished. Break what needs to happen into specific actionable tasks, each with a timeline, funding/resource allocation, person responsible, and success metric. This allows you to successfully delegate the lofty goals of your plan across a variety of qualified and committed team members with the confidence that they are all working with a common understanding.



Communicate your plan.

Once your action steps are complete, give as much consideration to the distribution of your plan as you did to the creation of your plan. Anyone who is directly impacted by this plan should get it from you personally. Consider also groups who might be indirectly affected (parent-teacher association, afterschool programs, etc), and make it accessible to them, too. If there are particularly interesting or newsworthy elements of your plan, don't be afraid to [share those with local media](#).



Work the plan.

Whatever you do, don't tuck your plan into a drawer, never to be seen again until next year's planning cycle. It should be a living document, and you should keep it within arm's reach at all times. This way it's top of mind as decisions need to be made and successes need to be celebrated.

4

Set and Prioritize Rigorous, Yet Attainable Goals

The last thing you want is a school improvement plan that doesn't offer any substantial improvement, or one that makes grand promises which you can't deliver. Set yourself up for success by always looking for that sweet spot in the middle: something that is aspirational, but that you can see a path from here to there.

First consider the quantity of goals. Your [needs analysis](#) and outcomes of your previous year's goals will likely yield up to a dozen different areas you'd like to improve, both organizationally and academically. This is where you have to strategically prioritize and focus on the 2-5 goals that are most important this particular year.

Maybe an area of focus is more of an organizational goal as pandemic challenges continue to directly impact staff shortages and morale. Or with the amount of instructional loss due to countless quarantines and school closures, maybe you want to prioritize the integration of more differentiated learning experiences to help bridge learning gaps.

Consider using one of these [prioritization strategies](#) to identify goals of urgency, value, and importance.

Once you've prioritized a reasonable number of goals, consider what smaller steps or actions are needed to realize the goal. Use a consistent format to articulate the goal and its action steps. This [SIP Goal Template](#) offers a structure to convey each goal's action steps complete with timeline, person responsible, funding/resources needed, and success metric. Feel free to use it or make a copy and adapt it to your needs. Defining the action steps for each goal in your SIP will make it easier to see results and celebrate success along the way.

Goal		
Identified Need:		
Root Cause:		
GOAL:		
Action Steps		
Task	Timeline	Person Responsible
Resources /Funding Needed:		
Success Metric:		
Task	Timeline	Person Responsible
Resources /Funding Needed:		
Success Metric:		
Task	Timeline	Person Responsible
Resources /Funding Needed:		
Success Metric:		
Van Andel Institute for Education VAEI.org		

SIP Goal Template

5

Investigate Funding Opportunities


Schools have long suffered from unfunded mandates — expectations for highly skilled teachers, without the funding to maintain high-level professional development; requirements for student achievement and yearly progress without the money for robust curriculum. But for the first time in living memory, schools now have access to significant federal funds that can be used to reinvent teaching and learning, to finally make good on our vision for how teachers should teach and how students should learn. That’s not to say funding is the only obstacle. There are certainly many challenges facing schools that funding cannot solve, but it’s a good start.

Since most school improvement plans will include funding plans, begin by making sure you understand all the funding options available to you. Explore a wide variety of funding sources with [Funding Opportunities](#), a resource that includes funding information on sources from government grants, competitive grants, corporate gifts, and crowdsourcing.

The chart below provides an overview of the ESSER funds available to public schools.

March 2020	December 2020	March 2021
ESSER I	ESSER II*	ESSER III*
Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act	Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act	The American Rescue Plan (ARP)
\$13B	\$54B	\$122B
Must be awarded by state within 1 year of receiving, which will be April-June 2021, depending on award date	Must be awarded by state within 1 year of receiving, which will be January 2022	Must be awarded by state “in an expedited and timely manner and, to the extent practicable, not later than 60 days after receiving those funds”
May be used for costs from 3/13/20 through 9/30/21	May be used for costs from 3/13/20 through 9/30/22	May be used for costs from 3/13/20 through 9/30/23

*Additional Funds: \$3 billion allocated to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), over \$7 billion in the Emergency Connectivity Fund, \$5.5 billion to support non-public schools (Emergency Assistance to Non-Public Schools)



This federal money is intended to help schools improve infrastructure to facilitate learning during the pandemic, as well as to help accelerate learning for students to overcome any “learning loss” resulting from the instructional disruptions. The criteria are purposefully vague, meaning the funds can be allocated quite broadly. There is flexibility to use ESSER funds on any “activity authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.” Here are some of the most common ways districts are spending the money.

Learning Loss

- Assessments
- After school/extended day programs
- Summer learning or enrichment programs
- Extended school year programs
- Professional development
- Instructional materials
- Staffing

Other

- Anything authorized by ESEA, IDEA
- Coordination efforts
- Activities for disproportionately affected populations
- Software, hardware, connectivity (including adaptive/assistive)
- COVID Safety
- Mental health services

For a deeper look at how ESSER/EANS funding has been allocated and how it can be used, explore these links:

- [National Conference of State Legislatures](#)
- [ESSER Legislative Bill](#)
- [Non-public Schools FAQs](#)
- [ESSER Cheat Sheet](#)
- [Federal FAQs](#)
- [Michigan FAQs](#)

With the influx of federal funding, schools are now left to decide how best to use that money. It’s a problem we’re not used to grappling with! Given the challenges of staff shortages and the need for teachers to differentiate instruction for widely varying levels of students, these are the top 3 areas we suggest investing in for enduring success.

Hire staff on a 2-year contract

Many administrators have reported success by using the federal funding to hire staff on a 2-year contract. In this way they can curb some of the immediate challenges due to shortages without committing to employment beyond the life of these funds. Hiring support staff to help with 1:1 tutoring and small group acceleration can provide some immediate gains.

Provide meaningful professional development

Look for PD opportunities that work for, not against, teacher morale and well-being. Offer PD that values teachers time by giving them the flexibility in format and timing. Ensure the PD respects what teachers already know and bring to the table. This can be done by differentiating PD for teachers and/or offering them choice in topics, ensuring the content is relevant to them.

Offer teachers resources for authentic learning

Authentic learning experiences intrinsically motivate students, so they are able to absorb more content more quickly. Larger projects also provide more opportunities to differentiate instruction so each student successfully moves ahead in their learning trajectory. But creating robust project-based learning units that are cross-curricular and include real-world application takes time, something teachers have far too little of. Look for a [supplemental curriculum](#) that does the heavy lifting in planning so teachers can do what they do best — teach!

6

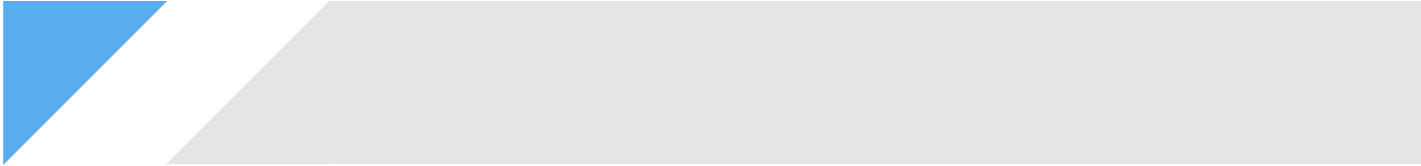
Create Effective Communication Plans

School improvement planning is complicated. There are multiple stakeholders and changing variables that can make it impossible to communicate every facet of the plan and be assured it is interpreted as you intend it to be. Yet if you keep the plan to yourself or only share it with those that are on a “need-to-know basis,” you risk being viewed as someone who isn’t open to feedback (or worse, someone who is hiding something), and you can inadvertently alienate key allies in your community.

The trick is to create an effective communication plan, one that is fully transparent, focused on consistent and key messages, and easily shared and understood by all interested parties. You can accomplish this by remembering two rules: 1.) Simplify Your Message, and 2.) No Surprises.

Simplify Your Message

Although managing a school or district is complex, but you don’t want to overwhelm your audience. The reality is, those who read your plan are going to simplify it anyway, so you might as well get in front of it and you dictate how it will be simplified. How do you simplify such complex information?

- 
- **Know the three things you want your audience to remember.** What are the three things your stakeholders care most about? What are you doing to move the needle on those key issues? You are working on a hundred different initiatives at any given time, but what are the three things you would want the local media to cover about your schools? Or what are the three things you'd want someone to tell your successor about your schools? Give these questions some thought until you feel comfortable with your three main points.
 - **Create a 1-page summary of your plan.** Look at infographics and flyers as inspiration. How can you display those three main points in a way that visually reiterates your message? Use iconography or graphic organizers, not just as decoration, but to reinforce your message. If graphic design isn't your strong suit, ask someone on your team — or even a student — for help. Or you may wish to use a [template such as this from SlideTeam](#). A one-page, visually appealing version of your plan allows your message to be shared reliably, consistently, and broadly, and is well worth the effort.
 - **Let your headings tell your story.** Everyone is pressed for time, and fewer than 1% of the people who receive your School Improvement Plan will read it from start to finish. They will skim the headlines and will often make their own assumptions about what the supporting text says. So make sure your headlines do the heavy lifting of conveying your three big ideas clearly and concisely. If someone only read the headlines of your plan, they should have a general sense of your direction and how you plan to accomplish your goals.

No Surprises

For better or worse, everyone has an opinion on how schools can be improved. There is no plan you can put forth that will satisfy all of the opinions out there, especially when they don't feel their voice is heard. Rather than fighting this reality, embrace it, and view school improvement planning as an iterative process.

- **Seek input from teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders.** Then marinate those thoughts with your own and create a draft that you then share with anyone who provided input.

- **Explain how their ideas were incorporated or share why they weren't as appropriate.** It may not be comfortable to let people know their ideas were not incorporated, but it's much better to address it head-on with sound evidence and explanation than to plow ahead and hope they don't notice.
- **As you share the draft, share openly the major tenets of your plan widely, planting the seeds of the plan early.** This helps stakeholders feel valued and informed, which makes them far more likely to support your ideas.
- **Publish your final draft publicly for full transparency.** Make it easy to find on your website; offer it up to parents; provide a copy to teachers. It needn't be a document that spends 360 out of 365 days a year in a drawer. If you make the effort to make it succinct and "sticky," then you want it to make the rounds, to serve as a guidepost for all who support the success of your schools.

7

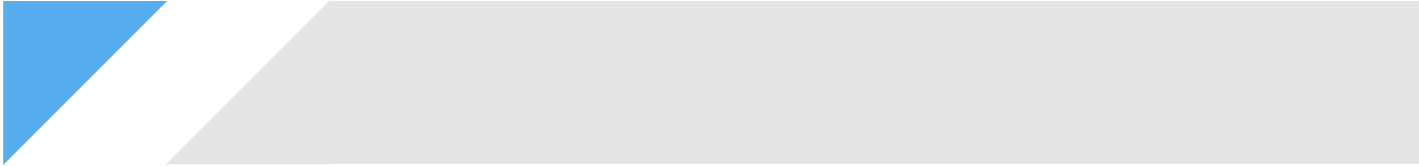
Don't Go It Alone

Managing a school or district is complicated, and you can't do it alone. The more you involve your teachers and your community, the more successful you will be.

Involve Your Teachers

We've established that most teachers aren't on the same page as their administrators when it comes to their School Improvement Plans (SIPs). But it doesn't have to be that way. It's clear that the primary driver in the differing perspectives is something all too human, a need for belonging. If teachers don't feel like they are a part of the planning process, they are not vested in the plan. The May 2019 EducationWeek article, [Teachers Are Cynical about School Improvement Plans](#), highlights some of the benefits of involving teachers in school improvement planning.

Teachers are on the front line of implementing any SIP. They see what is needed firsthand. And just as they are trained in identifying the gaps in an individual students' learning, they can help you identify the gaps in your school's effectiveness. They need a voice in the process.



Working with teachers, you can use shared data to determine what goals you want to achieve. They can help you identify what professional development is needed in order to meet those goals, vastly improving your chances of success. Teachers also have critical insights to inform the creation of success metrics. When administrators and teachers have a shared understanding of success criteria, they both know exactly what it will look like, and there is no ambiguity about when they have achieved their goal.

And if those reasons weren't enough, consider the recent endorsement of the teaching profession at the world-wide level as shown in UNESCO's recent publication, [Post-COVID World 9 Ideas for Public Action](#). Of their nine "ideas," number three squarely highlights the need to value the teaching profession and teacher collaboration:

“Value the teaching profession and teacher collaboration. There has been remarkable innovation in the responses of educators to the COVID-19 crisis, with those systems most engaged with families and communities showing the most resilience. We must encourage conditions that give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively.”

As you consider how to involve teachers, be mindful and purposeful. Don't set yourself up for more work trying to please too many people. Just make sure you have a specific plan for how you'll seek input and how you'll report back to them. Once you have your plan, invest yourself in it. Don't treat it like just another box to check. (Teachers will see right through that and the whole thing can backfire!) The goal is to move teachers from compliance to advocacy, from indifferent to engaged. Involving them (without making it onerous), is the key.

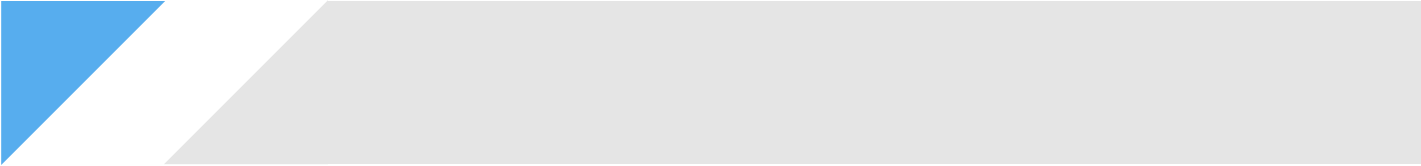


Ways to Involve Teachers

- **Survey teachers.** Once you have a framework of categories you'd like your plan to address, send them to teachers to see which ones resonate with them most. Ask them if there are other categories you haven't considered.
- **Form a teacher advisory council.** Select teacher representatives from various grade levels of the district to be on the school improvement planning team. Before every key decision is finalized, ask this group how the decision will impact teachers and what might be needed.
- **Provide planning updates at staff meetings.** Be transparent throughout the planning process. Use your regular staff meetings to let teachers know where you are at and how it's going. Make it a standing agenda item, and have fun with it. Treat it like a "Coming Attractions" trailer! This lightens it up a bit so it feels more accessible.
- **Tap specific talents.** Teachers have all kinds of hidden talents that you might be able to lean on in developing your plan. Is there an eagle-eyed proofreader? Someone good at making charts? A whiz with excel? A research guru? Outsource specific tasks to teachers to show you value those unique skills (and maybe save yourself a little time!) Just be mindful that you're not asking for too large of a time commitment. It's very hard for teachers to say no to an admin, so it's a fine line between a teacher feeling like their skills are sought after and valued vs feeling like they are trapped and taken advantage of.

Involve Your Community

Involving your community in your SIP can elevate it to a whole new level. Contacting local businesses, foundations, and service organizations removes the blinders that can sometimes form by spending all day inside a school building. It reminds you of the ultimate purpose of education, to develop the next generation of critical thinkers and problem solvers, to equip students with the tools needed to solve the world's most pressing problems. It's big stuff. And you can't possibly know how to prepare students for all the jobs that don't exist yet. But you don't have to figure that out by yourself.


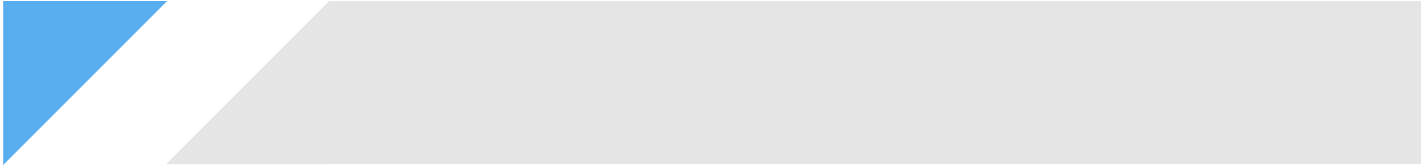


Find community members you trust and begin an open dialogue. This [Teach.com article](#) outlines several resources for connecting community and school. What you learn from community partners will at a minimum make your SIP sound well-informed and forward thinking, and it just may lead to innovative partnerships to pilot in the coming year.

Not sure where to start? Try your local Chamber of Commerce or check with your ISD. Don't discount your own preferences; seek out a business that you particularly like. The goal is simply to broaden your perspective a bit. To rise above the immediate pressure to show adequate yearly progress or to increase scores in a particular subject area and reconnect with the broader goals of the community. If you set the tone for this in planning, your teachers might follow suit in the classroom by engaging students in meaningful projects that make their community a better place. And [student engagement is a key driver in student achievement](#).

Ways to Involve Community


- **Interview business leaders.** Identify a range of business types and ask them what skills they need in their workforce and what skills they think they might need in the future. Ask what challenges they currently face with their employees.
- **Form a community advisory council.** In the same way you want to include teacher voices in the planning process, you can also benefit from community perspectives as you plan. Invite a few trusted community representatives to be a part of your SIP team.
- **Build community into the plan.** When business leaders see how hard you are working to create the best learning opportunities for your students, they'll be vested in your success. Maybe they are willing to be mentors; maybe they will come to a class and share insights; maybe they'll allow a tour of their facility. The possibilities are endless, so give it some thought (and your teachers may have thoughts on this as well), and don't be afraid to ask.



These guiding principles should help you navigate the 2021–22 school improvement planning cycle and all its pandemic-related nuances. If you'd like to research more, this PACE article, [continuous improvement in the COVID-19 context](#), provides more insights on planning through such a traumatic time. But in the end it comes down to you and your leadership. [Hanover Research](#) identifies the following leadership qualities as essential for principals to effectively execute the improvement process:

- Transformational** an ability to motivate and engage staff behind a strong organizational vision.
- Instructional** knowledgeable about instructional issues and able to align school activity to improve instruction.
- Strategic** able to formulate strategy and translate that into concrete priorities.

So, hold these qualities close and lean on them in times of doubt. I know you'll do your best, and in case no one has told you recently, thank you.



If part of your plan includes incorporating more authentic learning experiences and inquiry-based instructional practices, we would love to help. It's our passion to create classrooms where curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking thrive, and we'd love to partner with you in making it happen!

LET'S GET IN TOUCH



Explore VAI's Flex PD— Professional Development that delivers results and that teachers actually want!



[Free Needs Analysis Survey](#)



aaron.braunschneider@vaei.org



[VAI's Flex PD](#)

"Amazing! This 3-day series was unlike any other training I've ever had. I can finally see my works on paper becoming a reality with these projects!"

=VAI's Flex PD Attendee