**Theory of Action**

*NOTE: Possible template for a Theory of Action is included at the end of this document.*

*NOTE: As the District develops – in collaboration with sites – a District Master Schedule Theory of Action, it will be important to align District and site-specific Theories.*

“A theory of action is a set of underlying assumptions about how we move our organization from its current state to its desired future.” –Judy Skupa

A theory of action is “your best thinking made explicit… Your rationale for choosing one strategy over another…your predicted course of action with identified checkpoints and evidence that it’s working, or not.” – Harriette Thurber Rasmussen

**Typically, a theory of action follows the following format**:

Proposed Strategy:

If we do this, (describe in detail)

Then “X” will happen: (Explain in a research base why this will work)

And we will see this result in….

**Theory of Action**:

* Aligns intended theory with the realities of work within an actual organization.
* Connects strategy to the actions and relationships critical to good instruction and student learning.
* Identifies the mutual dependencies that are required to get the complex work of…improvement done.
* Grounded in research or evidence-based practice.
* Begins with a statement of a causal relationship between what I/we do and what constitutes a good result in the organization
* High leverage for achievement and equity
* Powerful enough to transform programs and practices
  + Adapted from *Instructional Rounds in Education* – Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman and Lee Teitel, 2009

EXAMPLES ( from *Instructional Rounds in Education*, City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel)

*Broad Theory of Action*: ”If our vision of writing across all content areas is compelling and students and staff have good motive and work hard, then students will write amore successfully.”

*Good Theory of Action*: ”If system and building level administrators monitor teaching practice in a serious and visible way, then teachers will teach high-level writing skills and then students will learn to write more fluently and powerfully.”

*Better Theory of Action*: “If teachers have access to coaching and professional development focused on the core skills of high-level writing, and if administrators monitor and support the acquisition of these skills through their daily visits to classrooms, then teachers will teach higher-level skills and students will demonstrate their learning by producing higher-level writing products.”

*Best Theory of Action*: “If teachers are knowledgeable about the performances that equate to high levels of writing, and if they participate in the development of assessments that provide evidence of those performances, then they will know how to test their own knowledge and skill against the requirements of the new curriculum, and students will demonstrate higher levels of performance in their writing.”

**Some questions to consider when developing a Theory of Action**:

*Where do I/we begin my/our research?*

***How do we get from the current state to the desired state?***

*What are the essential actions that will improve our master schedule process and product and improve results for our students, teachers, and other stakeholders?*

*What evidence do we have that these actions will be successful in our school/district?*

*As a result of these actions, what will happen?*

*How will this action/these actions result in an effective master schedule?*

*How will this action/these actions transform teaching and learning?*

*How will this action/these actions transform the use of time in our school?*

*How will this action/these actions result in “pure” pathway student cohorts?*

*How will this action/these actions result in effective scheduling of interdisciplinary*

*pathway programs of study?*

*How will this action/these actions result in common planning time for pathway teaching teams/communities of practice?*

*How will this action/these actions result in pathway student enrollments that reflect the*

*diversity of the school as a whole?*

*How will this action/these actions result in increased knowledge and skill about effective master scheduling?*

*How will this action/these actions impact students? Impact Teachers?*

*What will this action/these actions lead to?*

*What results will we see?*

**FROM THE EVALUATION TOOLKIT for Magnet School Programs**:

Developing a Theory of Action:

Key Actions:

* Surface assumptions about how your program/organization is supposed to work
* Create a logic model to explicitly connect your activities and goals
* Use your logic model to develop relevant evaluation questions

“When you are trying to figure out what works and why, begin with a thorough understanding of how your program (organization) is supposed to work. As the visual representation of your theory of action, a logic model can be useful for creating a shared understanding, clarifying assumptions, and focusing an evaluation.”

*CCASN NOTE: In most of the literature on change theory, A Theory of Change or a Theory of Action differs from logical model, since a Theory of Change or Theory or Action requires participants to surface and articulate underlying assumptions which can be tested and measures AND because it “shows a causal pathway from here to there” by specifying what is needed for goals to be achieved.*

**From ActKnowlege**: A Theory of Change “defines all the building blocks required to bring about a long-term goal. Like any good planning and evaluation method for…change, it requires participants to be clear on long-term goals, identify measurable indicators of success, and formulate actions to achieve goals.”

**From Jim Connell and Adenna Klem**: “You should ask yourself whether your Theory of Change is:

PLAUSIBLE *(stakeholders believe the logic of the model is correct: If we do these things, we will get the results we want and expect):*

DOABLE *(human, political (policy), and economic resources are seen as sufficient to implement the action strategies in the theory:*

TESTABLE *(stakeholders believe there are credible ways to discover whetehr the results are as predicted);*

MEANINGFUL *(Stakeholders see the outcomes as important and the magnitude of change in these outcomes being pursued as worth the effort).”*

**Why a Theory of Action is Important**

A Cautionary Tale: Monkeys love the seeds that are found in the middle of gourds. A hunter will tie a gourd to a tree or bush, and cut a thin sliver all the way to the middle. The monkey’s long, thin fingers allow it to slide a hand into the thin slice and grab the seeds, but the monkey doesn’t know to let go of the seeds and is easily trapped. In *Learning Targets*, authors Connie M. Moss and Susan M. Brookhart describe another way to catch a monkey in the wild. In their description, the hunter bores a small, cone-shaped hole in a coconut shell. The hole is just large enough to allow a monkey to squeeze its paw inside. After draining the coconut, the hunter ties it down, places a slice of orange inside the hole, and then waits. A monkey passing by smells the orange, reaches inside the coconut with its paw in order to grab the luscious treat, and ends up trapped. *(NOTE: There is also a youtube video on “how to catch a monkey” that depicts a Bushman using a similar approach to capture a monkey.* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHdJVzYBBOU*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHdJVzYBBOU) *)*

According to Moss and Brookhart,

“Capturing the monkey doesn't depend on the hunter's prowess,

agility, or skill. Rather, it depends on the monkey's tenacious hold

on the orange, a stubborn grip that renders it blind to a simple,

lifesaving option: opening its paw.

Make no mistake: the hunter doesn't trap the monkey. The

monkey's abiding tendency to stick firmly to its decision, ignore

evidence to the contrary, and never question its actions is the

trap that holds it captive.”

Similarly, Schreiber and Moss (“A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Teacher Beliefs,” 2002) and other researchers point out that the beliefs that we hold also hold us. Since our deeply rooted beliefs are the best predictor of our actions in any given situation, including our actions in the development of a master schedule, it is important that we surface our beliefs and assumptions and make them visible.

Schreiber and Moss remind us that, “to move forward, we must have the ability and will to transform and sometimes detach ourselves from present and past beliefs that dictate the ways we think, feel, and practice. Most importantly, we must have the ability to change or accommodate our ways of thinking to suit the world instead of changing our representation of the world to assimilate it to our ways of thinking.”

We need to recognize that all of us have a tendency to hold on to established (and often unexamined) beliefs and practices about high school and about learning, students, and the use of time that impact our master schedule process and product. Attention must be paid to forging a unified master schedule theory of action that fully integrates our espoused theory of action with our actual “day to day” theory in use *and* guides our master schedule work throughout a school and district. Doing so forces us to delve deeper when we encounter challenges and not simply look for quick fixes. Only by uncovering what is not working and calling our beliefs and practices into question will we get the master schedule we truly desire and grow as a learning organization.

**A few Theory of Action, Theory of Change, and/or Logic Model resources**:   
“Theory of Change: A Practical Tool for Action, Results, and Learning,” prepared for Annie E. Casey Foundation, prepared by Organizational Research Services, 2004

<http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/cc2977k440.pdf>

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide

http://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resource/2006/02/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-development-guide

“Theory of Change as a Tool for Strategic Planning: A Report on Early Experiences,” Wallace Foundation, Wallace Foundation/ Aspen Institute on Community Change August 2004 <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/advancing-philanthropy/Documents/Theory-of-Change-Tool-for-Strategic-Planning-Report-on-Early-Experiences.pdf>

**THEORY OF ACTION TEMPLATE**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Proposed Strategy: If we do this, (Describe in Detail…. | Then “X” will happen (Explain in research-base or theory-base why this will work) | And we will see this result in… |
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