
IL-EMPOWER Program Evaluation

2021 Principal Interviews

Submitted to
Illinois State Board of Education

September 8, 2021

By Tania Jarosewich, PhD



Insight through Evaluation

Hinckley • OH • 44233
440.570.7558

Tania@CenseoGroup.com

In partnership with



IL-EMPOWER 2021 Principal Interviews

Project Goals

One component of the 2021 external evaluation of IL-EMPOWER was to conduct a set of case studies to examine leadership and instructional practices in schools that had significantly improved academic achievement during the 2018-2019 school year. The Measurement Incorporated (MI) evaluation team, in collaboration with the Illinois State Board of Education’s (ISBE) Center of System Support, developed four research questions that would be investigated through interviews with school leaders.

- **Research Question 1.** What was the impact on schools of having received a designation on planning and organizing instruction in the subsequent school year?
- **Research Question 2.** What programs, systems, and/or strategies did schools implement to address needs and monitor implementation?
- **Research Question 3.** How did the organization build capacity to enact change and sustain efforts? What impact did COVID restrictions have on these efforts?
- **Research Question 4.** What recommendations or advice can successful schools offer the IL-EMPOWER system about how best to support school-based improvement efforts in Illinois?

The goal of the case studies was to help inform ISBE about how school personnel respond to, and engage with, school change efforts and to serve as the starting point for the 2022 evaluation process.

School Selection

The MI evaluation team reviewed Illinois school assessment data to identify a set of schools that participated in the IL-EMPOWER statewide system of support and had moved from the “Targeted” or “Comprehensive” Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) designation during school year 2018 (SY18) to “Commendable” in school year 2019 (SY19). Due to COVID¹, 2019 spring assessment data is the most recent information available. The evaluation team identified a subset of schools with the highest percentage growth on mathematics and English language arts academic indicators, and further refined that list to a set of schools dispersed geographically around the state with a range of demographic and school characteristics (see Figure 1). Schools located relatively close geographically allowed for an alternate selection if one of the schools was unable or unwilling to participate.

Table 1 lists the schools invited to participate in the case study interview. Of these schools, Gordon Bush Elementary School and Sandoval Junior High School also participated in the previous statewide system of support process, Illinois State System of Support (IL SSOS), and could potentially provide information about

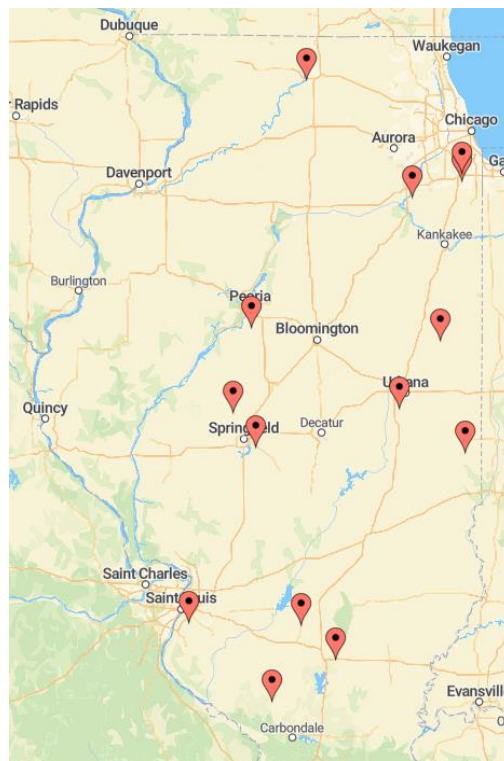


Figure 1. Geographic Dispersion of Potential Case Study Schools

¹ <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/state.aspx?source=trends&source2=iar&Stateid=IL>

the impact the types of support offered in both the IL SSOS and IL-EMPOWER systems.

Table 1. Potential Case Study Schools

Primary list					Participation
1.	Childs Elem School	Posen-Robbins ESD	Compreh	Commend	Yes
2.	Gordon Bush Elementary	East St Louis SD 189	Compreh	Commend	Yes
3.	Lincoln Elem School	East Peoria SD 86	Targeted	Commend	Yes
4.	Pinckneyville Elem School	Pinckneyville SD 50	Compreh	Exemplary	Yes
5.	Riverton Middle School	Riverton CUSD 14	Compreh	Commend	Yes
6.	Cassell Elem School	City of Chicago SD	Targeted	Commend	Declined
7.	Thomas Jefferson Elem	Joliet PSD 86	Targeted	Commend	No response
8.	West View Elem School	Rockford SD 205	Targeted	Commend	No response
Alternate list					
9.	Cissna Park Jr High School	Cissna Park CUSD 6	Targeted	Commend	No response
10.	Sandoval Jr High School	Sandoval CUSD 501	Compreh	Commend	No response

Project Timeline

The details of the interview process were finalized towards the end of the 2021 school year in late spring. This time of the year is, generally, hectic for principals, so the challenges of the 2020-2021 COVID learning year resulted in additional time constraints. Therefore, the process was planned to be as streamlined as possible, to decrease burden on schools but still collect the information needed to address the research questions.

- Finalize case study process: February 2021
- Select case study school sample: March 1, 2021 – March 15, 2021
- Send initial invitations and schedule interviews: March 15, 2021 – March 31, 2021
- Conduct interviews: April – May 30, 2021
- Create report draft, incorporate feedback, submit final report: July 2021

Invitation to Participate

ISBE staff sent an initial email to the principals of the potential case study schools to introduce the evaluation team and the goals of the case study process. The MI evaluation team sent follow up emails to provide additional details about the project and to schedule interviews. Each school received up to three emails. Administrators at five schools participated in an interview with one administrator declining to participate, and no response from four schools. The MI team was pleased that the five schools agreed to participate in the interviews and implemented an efficient and streamlined process to accommodate school schedules.

Interview Questions

Interviews with school administrators were conducted through a video conference call in Spring 2021. The following set of questions were used to guide the semi-structured interviews:

1. How did your school identify areas of focus for improvement in the 2018 school year? [SY18 was selected since that was the most recent year with full assessment data]
2. What programs, systems, strategies did you implement to address needs and monitor implementation?
3. Did a focus on or changes in any of the following areas impact outcomes?

- a. School Leadership
 - i. Change in leadership structure/governance/staffing
 - ii. Change in mindset/focus among school leaders (e.g., prioritizing social justice or multiculturalism)
 - iii. Professional development, learning conference, learning network
 - iv. Any other noteworthy changes to school leadership?
 - b. Teachers
 - i. Staffing changes in area of improvement (or other areas)
 - ii. Change in mindset/focus of teachers
 - iii. Professional development – more or different PD for teachers
 - iv. Any other noteworthy changes to teaching staff/training/support?
 - c. Parents/Community
 - i. New community-school partnerships? How did they come to be?
 - ii. Changes in engagement with parents and community (level of engagement, types of activities, etc.)
 - d. School Climate?
 - i. Noteworthy changes to school climate
 - ii. Major changes to disciplinary action/SEL?
4. Which/what combination were most important to success?
 - a. To what extent did targeted efforts and/or schoolwide efforts contribute to success?
 5. How did you build the capacity for new programs? (if not yet discussed)
 6. Progress during distance/hybrid COVID learning
 - a. To what extent were you able to continue successful interventions/systems during distance/hybrid learning?
 - b. Did you develop any new strategies that you found to be effective during this time?
 7. What resources were most helpful in implementing changes?
 8. How are you sustaining your efforts?
 9. What advice can you offer other IL-EMPOWER schools as they work to improve student outcomes? What supports do schools need most and how can IL-EMPOWER be more effective?

Results

Impact of IL-EMPOWER Designation

All five principals stated that receiving the designation of Comprehensive or Targeted School Improvement from ISBE was sobering. Only one of the five schools had previously been in this level of school improvement standing. However, administrators and school staff quickly understood the reasons for the designation.

All principals agreed that the designation focused attention on the need for school improvement and gave them the standing to make significant change. Having this designation allowed principals to move quicker to recommend changes and tackle more comprehensive reform than they could have otherwise undertaken. Even the principal in the school that had previously participated in IL SSOS used the opportunity of the designation to

“Our school is new on the list. It was shocking and devastating. We were a spotlight school in prior years, making progress for many of those years...It had an effect on staff morale.”

“We’re proud of our building and culture. We took offence at lowest designation. It bothered my teachers.”

engage the school in deeper reflection about student progress, instructional practices, and needed support to move student learning forward.

The IL-EMPOWER funded programs, professional learning, and support was critical for these five schools. All five principals stated that they could not have made significant progress without the additional funding that allowed them to provide the necessary technology, training, and instructional materials that had been lacking.

Of the five principals, three were new to their role at the time that the school was designated for IL-EMPOWER support and one became principal the year following the designation. Although several had worked in their school district prior to that year, none saw the designation as a threat or *refereundum* on their leadership capacity. This was important, as it allowed for clear-eyed reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the instructional programs and strategies, staff capacity, and organizational structure of the school.

Systems and Strategies for School Improvement

School improvement, under IL-EMPOWER, involves an iterative process for continuous growth and development. As viewed in Figure 2, schools begin by engaging in a collaborative *data analysis* of their system, student academic and school success quality data, and local student data. They also participate in a *system needs assessment* that includes completion of the Illinois Quality Framework Supporting Rubric (IQFSR) to identify strengths and gaps in adult practices of their school system.

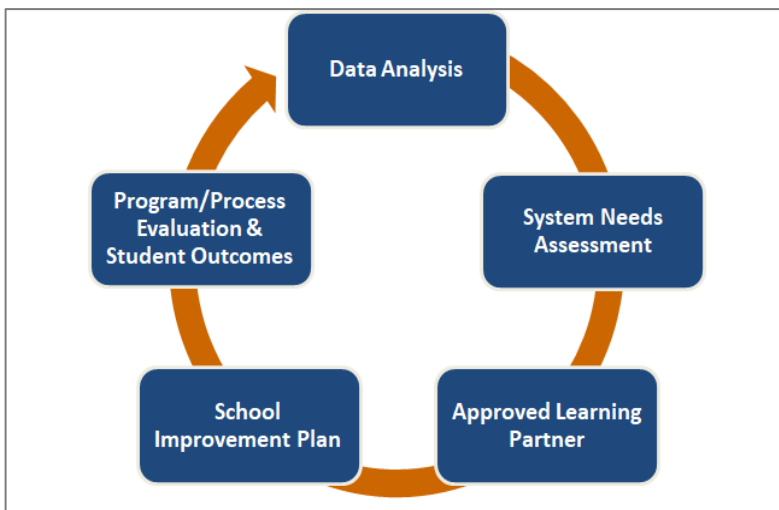


Figure 2. IL-EMPOWER School Improvement Process

Source: ISBE Webinar, January 2019

Based on their ESSA designation and eligibility for additional supports through IL-EMPOWER, schools’ contract with an approved Learning Partner (LP)- a provider with expertise in systems improvement, teaching, or learning. Schools develop a School Improvement Plan (SIP) that addresses areas of concern identified through the analyses of student data and the needs assessment. Concomitantly, districts apply for additional federal funds through the Title I School Improvement—1003(a) Grant to fund the implementation of their SIP. Districts may also support schools throughout the needs assessment process. Finally, schools implement and monitor their improvement plans and analyze student outcomes. Not depicted in the figure, but also part of IL-EMPOWER, are state-designated School Support Managers (SSMs) who serve as thought-partners to schools that are designated as lowest-performing and located outside of Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

During the interviews, principals discussed the strategies that they employed to address school needs. **Table 2** lists the number of times that each of the IL School Improvement Standards was mentioned during the interviews to gauge the relative attention to each of the standards and steps of the continuous improvement process.

Table 2. Number of Codes for each Standard

	N	%
Standard 1. Continuous Improvement	48	26%
Step 1. Data analysis and Step 2. System needs assessment (N=13)		
Step 3. Approved learning partner (N=15)		
Step 4. School improvement plan (N=2)		
Step 5. Monitoring progress (N=18)		
Standard 2. Culture and Climate	12	6%
Standard 3. Shared Leadership Development	32	17%
Standard 4. Governance, Management, Operations	30	16%
Standard 5. Educator and Employee Quality	20	11%
Standard 6. Family and Community Engagement	13	7%
Standard 7. Student and Learning Development	31	16%

Standard 1: Continuous Improvement

Important to the IL-EMPOWER process is that schools have a clear understanding of student and staff needs and that the school develop a focused plan for improvement. During the interviews, principals discussed the process that they led in their schools to identify areas of need and plan for improvement. The discussion of data analysis was often embedded within the discussion of systems need assessment, with principals describing an iterative process that included identifying areas of focus, determining systems-level change and combinations of strategies, and engaging stakeholders in the improvement process. One principal advised about the importance of taking the time to work fully through the needs assessment process with school stakeholders to clearly understand how best to effect positive and productive change. One principal stated, *“I knew that teachers were ready when I got here because they were at their breaking point, we needed to do something...Going through the rubric, it took hours, we really did it and had conversations.”* These conversations helped staff to begin to look forward to solutions.

Several principals stated that they were generally aware of school needs, but the process of conducting a needs assessment was valuable nonetheless. One principal stated, that they had been *“hired with clear directives of things that needed to change”* and another that they *“already knew [the] weaknesses”* and both agreed that the assessment process aligned with initial ideas. A third stated that the *“needs assessment gave validity to what I knew.”* In all these cases, the needs assessment process helped principals to identify combinations of potential changes that could contribute to growth and give administrators and staff a clarity about where to focus efforts.

The needs assessment process helped principals identify strategies and systems that needed to be put in place to support system-level school improvement. One principal said, *“The district [had] recognized that instructional practices needed to change but not that there were underlying culture and climate things that were going on.”* The needs assessment process helped to uncover areas contributing to the low performance that might otherwise have been ignored.

When conducted properly with sufficient support from school and district administrators and engaging with a variety of stakeholders, the contribution of the varied perspectives helped schools to clearly understand the problems and to start building solutions. Principals stated that the input and engagement of district and school administrators and teachers was critical to the process. One principal stated that the structured process helped *“teachers feel vulnerable enough to express their needs.”* No principals mentioned that parents or students had been engaged in needs assessment, although the interview did not specifically ask about the engagement of these groups of stakeholders.

“We spent hours, weeks going through the rubric having honest conversations. We needed to talk and get a good sense of where we were at to move forward...The rubric seems overwhelming, but you just need to do it...You have to embrace it and good things can happen. And your students deserve that. I don’t know how to get people to understand that it’s not a hoop to jump through. It was to identify and bring things to light that you haven’t thought about before. Going through that rubric framed it in a different way.”

The third step of the continuous improvement process focuses on learning partners. Principals in one region were pleased with their regional school specialist and ROE staff, discussing the importance of having *“school support specialists with the content knowledge able to provide support”* and to *“navigate through data.”*

However, principals had mixed reviews about the utility of learning partners, particularly the availability of approved partners with the skills and an approach that was effective for them. One principal stated, *“The providers that the grant allows, I’ve not found helpful. The frustration is not letting us use providers that we know that we would like to use.”* This principal wanted to work with a partner who was not on the approved list, further stating, *“I wish they would not make you use their specific learning partners. That’s the biggest obstacle. Here’s the money, I know you need it, but you can only use it the way that I want you to use it.”* The principal also wished for a different IL-EMPOWER Coordinator, stating, *“This year, I haven’t gotten anything out of [the IL-EMPOWER Coordinator]. It’s been a waste of time to meet. [The previous person] helped push me and helped me push the staff. She laid it out very well for all of us. Didn’t beat around the bush. We miss her a lot.”*

Principals wished for more freedom to select partners and the way in which they would like to work with partners. One principal said that the district has *“scaled back on consultants”* to ensure that they are engaging only those who provide the focus in the area that is of immediate and critical need. Another wished for partners that work collaboratively, *“We know our schools. We don’t need them to come in and do something to us. Come hand to hand with us.”* Schools liked working with partners with whom they had a previous relationship, and partners who knew the context and community of the school. A number of the principals stated that they enjoyed working with other school district or ROE learning partners.

Principals did not discuss their school improvement plans in great detail. Two principals passively mentioned the plan, but more often discussed the other aspects of the continuous improvement process, such as progress monitoring. All five principals discussed the importance of frequent progress monitoring on specific metrics and data points. One noted, *“It’s been great to be able to say ‘look where we were last year and look where we*

are now'. It's been refreshing." From the interviews, it was clear that staff in these schools was using data more often and with greater facility to support requests for program change, sharing successes, and modifying instructional strategies.

In contrast to what is often heard about school assessment, principals were disappointed about the lack of large-scale assessment in Illinois due to COVID. One principal said, "*We're devastated not to have had testing in 2020.*" Principals were frustrated that they would not be able to assess student growth over the year. All were optimistic that their students made gains despite the challenges of COVID disruptions. Principals were glad to have progress monitoring data, and one principal discussed specifically gains on NWEA testing over the year, saying, "*We have seen huge gains, tons. We had seen gains and were anticipating growth.*"

Standard 2: Culture and Climate

All five principals discussed the importance of a positive school climate and culture, with one principal mentioning specifically the importance of "*relationships with students and adult social emotional support*" to sustain changes in instructional practices. Instead of beginning with a new curriculum or professional learning about instructional practices, one principal invested funds and attention on professional learning for staff about "*mindfulness, morning meetings, and building relationships with students ... we focused on changing adult mindset about taking care of themselves [and] how we speak with kids. It's made a huge change.*" Once the social emotional piece was in place, the second year of IL-EMPOWER implementation turned to reading and writing instructional practice.

Another principal attended to culture and climate by investing in informal learning that was exciting and interesting to teachers and students.

This principal said, "*I asked teachers what they were really interested in and tried to make it happen. [We created a] Lego wall and [other] fun elements. I loved going to the maker space and watching kids excited about doing activities.*"

"Our school climate is very positive. The custodian is just as important as me in that child's life. Our building is immaculate. If you're a good, custodian, aid, central office staff, you have a role in every kids' education. We all have our part. We all affect our kids' school careers."

Standard 3: Shared Leadership

All five principals were kind, thoughtful, and open about their strengths and weaknesses. All five subscribed to a shared leadership philosophy and described strategies that helped to bring together and empower teachers and staff to work together to achieve school goals. Principals mentioned school-level curriculum and instructional leadership teams that included administrators, teachers, staff, and instructional coaches that met regularly to review goals, share information, discuss strategies, and implement school reform efforts for a "*more solid and consistent*" school. One principal said, "*It's good to have [the leadership team] sitting around the table and thinking things through before we push it out and have staff buy in. ... it's the way to do things – my ego will not be too big that I won't listen.*"

One principal specifically discussed the value of listening to teacher input, which in the case of this school uncovered "*glaring points that we wanted to correct.*" Another described the efforts of a group of teachers who successfully advocated for change with the district curriculum team based on data that teachers had collected. Another principal described the advantage of working in a small school to involve all staff in

discussions and decisions, describing the philosophy as *“everybody on board and together. When we’re brainstorming, [we all bring] ideas to the table.”*

Despite success with strengthening shared leadership within schools, one principal commented about an ongoing challenge with a lack of shared leadership and authentic engagement with the school board. This situation was one that affected teacher morale and resulted in staff turnover. This example highlights the need for engagement across all levels in a school district. Even though this school was successful and made progress on IL-EMPOWER indicators, the principal noted that a better relationship with the school board would have added to the effectiveness of implementing changes.

Standard 4: Governance, Management, Operations

All five principals described a careful and measured approach to deciding how to use IL-EMPOWER funds, and took care not to purchase unnecessary materials or services. They carefully selected elements to meet school needs and build staff capacity to use the new tools. Principals described that they began with specific elements, and expanded efforts as staff experienced success with new strategies or methods. One of the principals new to the position quickly realized that a step-by-step, measured approach was the best way to proceed. This principal stated that at the start, there was a desire to *“fix everything. We came in as a leadership team and focused on everything, 7-8 goals, 3-4 consultants, and curriculum support... We got smarter in Year 2 and 3... The district did an evaluation on consultants and we scaled back and took a laser focus on consultants [so that staff] in the school [could] build capacity to do those things on their own.”* This school tightened its focus onto two core teams *“one instructional and one on culture.”*

Another topic the principals discussed related to governance, management, and operations was the financial outlay required to improve technology, hardware, professional learning, and technology integration. Principals made careful selections, choosing less expensive Chromebooks to be able to provide hardware to a greater number of students. One discussed the challenge of *“having 30 Chromebooks for 120 kids,”* which created barriers for students to access curriculum materials. Another school *“switched the computer lab to full Chromebooks. ... to make sure that everybody has Chrome tablets.”*

Technology integration was an important focus of IL-EMPOWER funds to ensure that staff and students were able to make the best use of new hardware. This focus on technology integration became very important during the distance and hybrid learning that occurred in the schools at the end of the 2019-2020 and during the 2020-2021 school years due to COVID. One principal said about technology enhancement and integration that the school is *“still working on that. [We] got approval for an instructional technology coach and put devices in all of our children’s hands before the pandemic.”*

Principals discussed the impact of staff turnover as both an opportunity and a *“challenge to improve.”* Staff retirements allowed principals to hire teachers trained in the most recent instructional strategies and who, generally, were more willing to experiment. One principal said, *“New staff don’t know anything other than workshop model. They say, ‘Well yea, that’s how you teach reading. What do you mean that you didn’t have differentiated groups?’”* Principals were pleased to hire staff whose instructional philosophy and approach aligned with the schools’ goals. However, principals also discussed how staff turnover was disruptive to students and the school community. The need to hire and support newly hired staff required a great deal of a principal’s attention.

Standard 5: Educator and Employee Quality

All five schools developed a robust system of professional learning to support newly hired teachers and veteran staff. Professional learning at three schools focused on helping teachers use the core literacy program to support student needs and decrease the need to purchase additional resources or supplies. Professional learning also helped support best instructional practices in learning centers, technology integration, and social emotional curricula and practice.

"We have good teachers who care about kids and were doing what they thought was best but didn't have the tools."

One principal hired a consultant and another an instructional coach to support teachers. Additional staff to support professional learning and coaching were particularly important when schools started to make many changes. Teacher professional development is discussed later, in the "Building Capacity to Enact Change and Sustain Efforts" section.

Standard 6: Family and Community Engagement

All principals discussed efforts to improve communication with families, support family needs, and increase family comfort and familiarity with the school environment. Schools tried a variety of ways to communicate with parents, including going out into the community to share messages, taking food and clothing to families, using technology (e.g., Class Dojo), and inviting families to school for events. The schools used parent liaisons and community partners to connect with families. Schools also asked families to help identify their needs and develop solutions rather than assuming that the schools' solutions would be useful.

"It's hard to get parents to come into the school so we come to them. We work with community partners and we go to the neighborhoods. We had a meet and greet. It was informal - parents could come to talk to us, meet new staff, see who's coming back. We shared data, we shared food. Hope we can get back to things like that after COVID."

Two principals mentioned that they began to monitor attendance more closely after the IL-EMPOWER designation, reaching out to families to ask about reasons for student absences, alerting parents, making calls, and keeping parents engaged. One principal said that the *"Principal and superintendent, we go pick up kids. Why are you still in your pajamas? We pick them up and bring them to school."*

Another principal said, *"There are lots of things that contribute to why kids are not here. We created wraparound support for families."*

"We need to hear from our families what they want instead of us sitting in an office making decisions for them. We complain that we don't see certain families. And we think we know answers. How about we ask people what we can do to help/change this."

Two principals mentioned specifically the importance of student and family feedback on the Five Essentials survey (i.e., the criteria of 25% participation among parents). Principals had not previously attended to this indicator,

not having “*communicated with parents or cared about that survey.*” The impetus from IL-EMPOWER seems to have significantly impacted robust and authentic engagement with families.

Standard 7: Student and Learning Development

All five principals took seriously their role as instructional leaders. They knew exactly which core programs their teachers were using, were aware of alignment across grades and whether that alignment needed to be strengthened, and what intervention programs were in place for students who needed additional support. Several principals noted that their school had no core curriculum at the start of the grant period; teachers were using their own materials or those that did not align across grades or with grade-level standards. Three principals adopted new core curriculum programs to meet school needs.

Other areas of improvement in student and learning development included strengthening learning centers, improving instructional strategies for writing, supporting differentiated instruction, and supporting problem solving skills. Two principals mentioned moving to mathematics instruction after literacy instruction was strengthened. Two discussed intervention programs and out-of-school or afterschool programs to help address gaps in learning.

Several administrators discussed the importance of maximizing learning time and instructional efficiency. One such strategy was the work of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and behavior teams to decrease time out of classrooms and suspensions.

Building Capacity to Enact Change and Sustain Efforts

Three general themes emerged in the discussion about building capacity and sustaining change: professional development and support, connecting efforts with other initiatives, and making systems changes that will support sustained efforts.

Professional Development

Principals emphasized the importance of building staff capacity and a structure that would help support new ways of working together. One principal said, “*I won’t be here forever. What structures have I put in place for the work to continue when I’m not here? It’s building capacity in my staff. It’s not me leading it, it’s the staff.*”

All five principals discussed the high level of teacher commitment to students. One principal said of staff, “*They are willing to work hard and have genuine care for kids in our community...Many a day when I get here at 6:30am, teachers are already here. It’s an outstanding staff...they believe in what they do. They love kids.*” Principals discussed the importance of supporting teachers’ professional learning and building capacity with a robust system of professional learning to “*stabilize people’s skills.*” One specific strategy for teacher learning was teacher leaders guiding peer-to-peer professional learning, conducting walkthroughs, and providing constructive feedback and support to peers.

One principal discussed the importance of the IL-EMPOWER School Support Manager in helping to build school and teacher capacity. This required that the principal understands their own skills and limitations and have a strong trust in the specialist. The principal said, “*I understand when I’m done. Next year, we’re bringing outside people to work with us. I’ve observed some teacher going back to old habits that we’ve had before.*” The principal has looked forward to determine whether different types of consulting and support will be required in later years to scaffold movement improvement.

Principals balanced the engagement of consultants with building staff capacity and skills. One principal stated that she uses the idea of “*strategic reduction,*” which is reducing the need for outside help by building internal

capacity. The principal is thoughtful about how many consultants to engage with, is clear about the role consultants will play, and mindful of a timeline for how long they will work in the school. The principal *“made tough decisions about when to stop working with a consultant because staff had built capacity...[It is] thinking about sustainability as your work.”*

This focus on building capacity was mentioned by another principal, who discussed the importance to *“prioritize funds that would best benefit [our school], rather than throwing money at providers. We’re not spending it on somebody else’s. We had to push back a lot. initially IL-EMPOWER was really pushing for partners. We said, we don’t need somebody else.”*

Connecting with Other Efforts to Support Sustainability

Two principals discussed the importance of connecting different initiatives in their schools in order to take advantage of all of the available resources to support student progress. One principal described the value of having built relationships with a local foundation and county department of health to connect with families and provide out-of-school learning opportunities. This work, funded by the foundation, provided additional staff as well as methods to address student educational needs. A second principal discussed using funds from another school improvement grant to hire a family engagement specialist who has supported school efforts to increase family engagement, including family participation in the “5 Essentials Survey.”

Systems-Level Change

The final strategy to sustaining change mentioned by all five principals, focused on systems-level changes. Principals identified district-level support as important to implementing some initiatives and sustaining others. One principal said, *“[Central office] supported me and were a partner at the table. They were a part of the conversation. Building leadership [is effective]...when you have [the district and] teachers on board.”*

One principal discussed the impact of a district-wide attendance effort, the “Strive for 95” campaign, which included a district attendance team, district and school incentives, and support for families. District engagement enhanced the message and emphasized its importance to students and families. It also took advantage of existing district infrastructure and efficiency.

Another valuable district-level effort that supported school improvement was the assistance of district staff in analyzing and using assessment data. One district implemented a dashboard system across all schools, and an assessment specialist helped schools utilize the district tool and data to make decisions. The support of the assessment specialist and a curated tool were useful. The principal said, *“That extra layer helps tremendously.”*

In a number of these project schools, the school led the district in making improvements. *“Some things that happened at the school level, the district took the school’s lead. Family engagement started at [this school] and pretty quickly turned that around in the district.”* This work across the district increased the chances that the efforts would be sustained.

Impact of COVID Restrictions on Improvement Efforts

The five schools in the study seemed to have weathered the challenges and difficulties of COVID restrictions fairly well. The fact that these principals were able to make the time to participate in the evaluation study was a testament to the level of stability that they achieved for their school.

The resilience, flexibility, and attention to detail of these principals is evident in the way that they addressed the COVID learning year. One principal described that the year started off with *“jumping in there. Not having an actual plan, thinking on our feet. We knew that we had to provide instruction no matter how it looked. I’m*

proud to say that my teachers took the bulls by the horn and ran with it.” This principal said that the school community discussed how learning should look and teachers took the initiative to structure learning opportunities for their students. The principal continued, “We’ve continued operations as usual. You wouldn’t have thought that we were in a pandemic – we tackled everything head on. [It’s a] testament, parents calling and telling us how wonderful it went. Bringing back students, some were hesitant but seeing how it looked, more wanted to come back. Scholars come first. [We] center everything around that.” Another principal described a similar situation, “This school year, we were only remote two weeks. We still had morning meetings every morning with all students. Even students who are on remote learning have morning meeting time. I was very pleased with that. Even though in-person is not sitting together on a rug, we still have things going on.”

Another principal described the hard work that the principal and teachers put into welcoming students back to school and in-person learning: *“Every day, since day one...People wanted to work this year and that’s what we’ve done.”* The principal further stated that IL-EMPOWER efforts, particularly the culture change that had happened in the school prior to the 2020-2021 school year, supported the school’s ability to provide a robust learning experience during COVID. Part of the success was the principal’s commitment to personally informing families about health matters and being open to communication from families and staff. *“A lot of [principals] would not make personal calls. I believe in standing in front of the people...They see me, they can approach me, my door always open, people can come talk to me at any time.”*

Similarly, another principal discussed how the professional learning system created prior to COVID was quickly adapted as staff *“learn[ed] how to do things virtually. [Professional learning] had to [be] bite-sized. [It became] a true model of PD. Teachers signed up for specific strategies, skills, and facilitators that they wanted to see more of. They could bounce in and out of PD”* to select experiences that would best meet their needs.

Another principal discussed successes with family engagement and family support. This principal expressed gratitude about the program that a local foundation had started in partnership with the county health department the year prior to the COVID pandemic. This existing partnership offered a foundation from which to engage with families. *“It was a lifesaver. We started with them knocking on doors to get people food and internet access. [We had] a full-time social worker in my sister school who works with us and our families and a liaison to other community agencies.”* Through the partnership, the school better understood family transportation and child care needs. The community work had led to the school creating a way to hold meetings (e.g., Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings) through Google Meet before the pandemic hit, which led to seamless use of the system during COVID. Although these processes were not a direct outcome of the IL-EMPOWER grant, this principal stated that by ensuring that all school efforts and programs are aligned, her school was able to make greater progress during COVID. This principal said that the school also had success with continuing monthly PTA meetings, drive-up school activities, and district initiatives.

A specific challenge during COVID learning that one principal mentioned, was maintaining attendance and student interest. This principal said, *“[We had a] hard time to get kids to come in. Virtual kids were not coming in. We had about 55 quarantined kids at any given time. We won’t get the 90% attendance threshold.”*

Even so, all five of these principals focused on the positive changes or at least the adequate adaptations that their schools had made to meet student and family needs during the COVID pandemic. Although each expressed disappointment that the learning environment was less robust and that attendance was not as strong as typical, they each identified, unprompted, success that they had experienced. Perhaps this problem-solving attitude and reflection on success were one of the reasons for their success.

Recommendations for IL-EMPOWER Support

When asked about recommendations, one principal offered suggestions for schools participating in IL-EMPOWER school improvement efforts. This principal recommended that other principals take seriously the needs assessment process and bring together a strong team to work through needs assessment and planning. This principal recommended, *“You have to embrace it and from it, good things can happen. And your students deserve that. I don’t know how to get people to understand that it’s not a hoop to jump through. It is to identify and bring things to light that you haven’t thought about before. Going through that rubric framed [our work] in a different way.”* This principal further recommended that principals approach the reporting requirements equally as seriously, *“We’re entering our data and I know that some people are entering random numbers. But if you use the process the way that it is intended, you can move your school forward. Going through the process, [helped us create an] authentic SIP plan.”*

Several principals noted that the IQFSR is not particularly helpful for monitoring change and assessing improvement, stating that the way in which data are reported in IQFSR do not focus on the areas that are the areas of challenge for schools. They encouraged ISBE to review the instrument and process to make improvements that could better support schools in their change efforts.

The final set of recommendations for ISBE was to encourage greater flexibility for schools to select learning partners and support specialists who had the skills that could target their needs. One principal described the potential of IL-EMPOWER support to help accelerate improvement because consultants *“can see the bigger picture and the process of how we are trying to sustain. EMPOWER work has helped to see big picture.”* Another advised that ISBE *“assign school support specialists with the content knowledge able to provide support.”* Another principal discussed the importance of having a partner in collaboration rather than an expert to come in and lead change, stating that after a robust needs analysis, schools should have *“Confidence about what you need and knowing administrators, teachers, parents, and children. Nobody knows them better than us.”* Several principals mentioned that over the years they had built strong relationships with staff in their Regional Office of Education (ROE) who were familiar with their schools and their staff and who in previous years had effectively guided school efforts.

Summary

The interviews provided insights into the workings of five schools that had effectively managed a school improvement process. All five principals who participated in the interviews were thoughtful, open, and clear-eyed about the difficulties encountered when trying to change a system. They all took the work seriously, conducting a robust needs assessment and engaging the entire school community in systems-level change and improvement. Principals included district staff in the change efforts to help build systems and generate district-level support for sustainable efforts. The schools focused on all of the steps of the school improvement process and appreciated the funding to implement change as well as being able to select IL-EMPOWER learning partners who were skilled, thoughtful, collaborative. The result of the change efforts in these five schools can help other administrators understand the value of fully engaging in the IL-EMPOWER process.