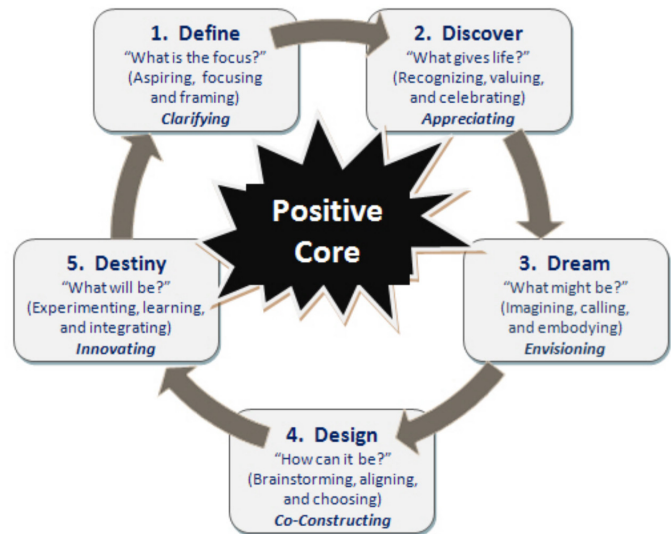


Inclusionary Practices and Systems:

STRENGTHS BASED PLANNING FOR INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS

WHAT IS STRENGTHS BASED PLANNING?

Instead of building from what already exists and is working in schools, inclusion discourse has focused on the problems associated with the practice, which has resulted in schools taking a more hands-off approach instead of examining how they can optimize their schools to provide services to students in a variety of ways. Strengths based planning for inclusive systems encourages a paradigm shift in thinking for school districts whose methods are rooted in problem solving. In every school there are things that are working well. In education, we have the tendency to examine the problems associated with our practices, instead of examining what's working well, why it's working well, and how we can use that information to make things better. This asset based approach is a productive way for schools and districts to leverage their strengths to become more inclusive. The basic foundation of strengths based planning relies on identifying and enhancing what an organization does best. By doing this, stakeholders at a school and leadership at the district level have the opportunity to assess positive dimensions of a school or the district's performance while also collecting data to aid in the process of organizational reform. One tool to use in strengths based planning is Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organizational development and action research tool that was developed by David Cooperrider from Case Western University in 1986. The basic foundation of AI relies on identifying and enhancing what an organization does best. It is less concerned with the right answers, than it is with asking open-ended questions that seek to allow the participants to speak, in story form, the truth as they live it and to uncover the very best of "what is?" and "what could be?"



WHY IS STRENGTHS BASED PLANNING IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES?

When schools and districts recognize successes as a way to build the confidence of the community, they are more likely to implement bold strategies for inclusion. The energy and emotions associated with identifying, celebrating, and building on strengths enables people to transform systems and to get them moving in new directions. By noticing strengths within a school district and all the good things that are going on, Appreciative Inquiry, or another strengths based approach, turns the tables on old conversation patterns about what is wrong, which can turn into finger pointing sessions. As people start rooting their conversations in what is working, the safety required for innovation, risk-taking, and learning grows. People become more open, forthcoming, and confident - leading to greater change, and in result, more inclusive schools.

Inclusion invites stakeholders and school districts to challenge the system that has perpetuated the segregation of students with disabilities. Inclusion requires a commitment from all levels of the system about the value of all students. When all levels of the system are provided with the opportunity to work together and focus on what is working, they have the capacity to generate powerful ideas to make schools stronger. Discovering and building on strengths leads to increased feelings of hope, aspiration, possibility, and the collective efficacy for transformational change.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

- Discovering and making explicit what is working in an organization is an important step in charting specific actions and to initiate and implement positive change.
- History has proven that in order to support successful education reforms, leaders and stakeholders need to work together to actively seek changes.
- Strengths based planning gives voice to an organization and generates practical and applicable data to contribute to professional development for stakeholder groups
- Strengths based planning, such as Appreciative Inquiry, is practical. It uses action research to change practice.
- Strengths based planning provides schools and districts with the opportunity to assess the positive dimensions of an organization's performance while also collecting data to aid in the process of organizational change.

CASE STUDY: BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT

Bellingham School District's journey to inclusion is firmly rooted in their Bellingham Promise. The school district developed the Bellingham Promise in partnership with the Student and Parent Advisory Committees, the Bellingham Public Schools Foundation Board, employee association leaders, and a variety of other parent and community groups. Thousands of comments were collected at meetings and through an online survey and themes were identified from those comments and that feedback helped build The Promise. The Bellingham promise calls the district to the right work and provides them with key strategies to get there. Included in the key strategies to approach their promise is a strategy describing their commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Under this strategy, the Promise states that in Bellingham schools "We envision and strive for a more diverse, inclusive and equitable organization. Focus areas include, but are not limited to, race and ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, language and culture." Their promise helps the district

to support a simple yet powerful district strategic plan that compels the system to work on issues, currently focused on inclusive education.

Bellingham School District is using what works within their organization to make strategic, sustainable, and salient moves to make their school district more inclusive. These moves align with their already existing Bellingham Promise. Families in their district are interested in and asking for inclusive settings and are demanding that the schools rethink how they are doing things. Educators in their system have started some grassroots collaboration efforts and are implementing inclusive practices and recognizing things that are working well in their schools. Bellingham's district leadership has a history of making brave and creative changes and has already engaged in the work to develop a collaborative culture. When they talk about inclusion, all departments are at the table and recognizing and finding their role in this work. Bellingham School District has leaders who truly want to make a difference for ALL students and that includes both Teaching and learning, special services, as well as operations. These groups are modeling how to work together to achieve inclusive outcomes by breaking down silos at the district office to show that they all own all students in their schools.

Bellingham School District is in the process of working through a strengths based approach to make their district more inclusive focusing on what is working well. They believe that the responsibility to educate all of their students is the responsibility of all educators at all levels in the Bellingham School District. This collective efficacy is a result of the strength based approach they are taking, because it requires collaboration, reflection, and action. Bellingham School District has committed to leveraging existing strengths and engaging students and families as co-designers to fully realize their promise to shift mindsets, instructional practices, and services. Bellingham Public Schools is using a strengths based approach to allow them to shift and change their practices and systems to keep their collective commitment to the inclusion and education of all Bellingham's children.

RESOURCES

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