

TITLE PAGE

Title: School Accountability: The NEA KEYS Initiative, a Reflective, Data-Driven Strategy for Continuous School Improvement

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ABSTRACT

School Accountability: The NEA KEYS Initiative, a Reflective, Data-Driven Strategy for Continuous School Improvement

The “No Child Left Behind “ Act of 2001 imposes new strict test-based accountability requirements on schools where students perform poorly. Typically, accountability in public education has been considered solely in terms of the relationship between inputs and outputs. The inputs are usually referred to in terms of equity and adequacy of resources (e.g., money, quality of teaching pool) while outputs are the outcomes produced by the system as measured by performance based high-stakes testing.

If schools are to improve however, the concept of accountability must be expanded beyond the input-output debate. Strategies and tools must be developed to measure and hold schools accountable for the processes and application of best practices that lead to higher student achievement. The KEYS initiative developed by the National Education Association is an example of such a research-based tool.

The NEA KEYS (Keys to Excellence for Your School) initiative is a school improvement strategy that emphasizes a process of deliberative self-study as a vehicle for making good decisions and developing locally determined solutions to problems of self-renewal. The initiative begins with the KEYS survey instrument, a diagnostic tool that engages the school staff and community in the assessment of a set of school conditions that support effective teaching and learning and are systematically related to high student achievement. These assessments are then compared with data about conditions in average and high performing schools thus stimulating further inquiries, meaningful staff discussions and focused efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The Effective Schools research and W. Edward Deming's quality and continuous improvement principles provided the theoretical framework for the research leading to the KEYS instrument. Recently, the original KEYS instrument has been revised to include a series of questions that yield objective data about the quality of the school's curricular and instructional practices in addition to the organizational conditions that support the teaching and learning process.

The revised KEYS instrument yields 42 indicators of school quality that are clustered into six main "Keys:"

- Shared understanding and commitment to high goals
- Open communication and collaborative problem solving
- Continuous assessment for teaching and learning
- Personal and professional learning
- Resources to support teaching and learning
- Curriculum and instruction

The use, scoring and analysis of the instrument provide the stimulus for beginning the school's journey toward improvement and renewal. From this point forward the initiative involves a series of technical assistance and consultative efforts to help the school staff and community gain a better understanding of the problem, develop a shared vision or where the school should be headed and engage in activities that realize this vision.

The presentation will be divided equally into three parts: (1) a look at how the NEA quality school initiative began and in particular how the KEYS instrument evolved based on a series of empirical studies demonstrating the relationship between the indicators of school quality and student achievement; (2) a demonstration of how schools, school districts and the local NEA Affiliates have used KEYS to improve the quality of schools and strengthen their labor management partnerships and (3) a discussion of the KEYS Online capabilities and the development of a series of newly designed technical assistance and capacity building products and services to help the staff in schools and school districts gain the knowledge, skills and resources to use the data to engage in a reflective and deliberative process leading to school improvement. Finally, KEYS materials will be distributed and information on how schools and school districts could access NEA KEYS will be shared with participants.