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STACEY CHILDRRESS  
RICHARD ELMORE  
ALLEN GROSSMAN  
MODUPE AKINOLA

## Note on the PELP Coherence Framework

In the present accountability environment, public school districts face an imperative to act coherently in the pursuit of specific performance goals. The various elements of a district – its stakeholders, culture, structure, systems, and capacity – must be managed in concert and be focused on the improvement of teaching and learning across the district to increase student performance. Leaders who have tried to implement a district-wide strategy for improving the achievement of all students know how difficult it is to achieve this coherence.

The PELP Coherence Framework<sup>1</sup> is designed to help district leaders identify the key elements that support a district-wide improvement strategy, bring those elements into a coherent relationship with the strategy and each other, and guide the actions of people throughout the district in the pursuit of high levels of achievement for all students.

### Overview

Webster's Dictionary defines coherence as "the quality of being logically integrated." Coherence, for the purpose of this note, means that the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to execute an articulated strategy. The PELP Coherence Framework is designed to help leaders effectively implement strategy, and then manage and evaluate performance at the district and school level. The framework emerged out of interactions with a number of U.S. public school leaders eager to identify ways to better organize and manage their complex organizations. Although drawn from models used in the business sector, the ideas have been considerably adapted to the unique context and challenges of managing in public education. The framework assists with achieving coherence by:

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of the PELP Coherence Framework are adapted from The Congruence Model developed by Professor Michael Tushman of Harvard Business School and Professor Charles O'Reilly of the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. For an explanation of the Congruence Model, see their book, *Winning Through Innovation*, Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 1997.

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Lecturer Stacey Childress, Professor Richard Elmore, Professor Allen Grossman, and Research Associate Modupe Akinola prepared this note.

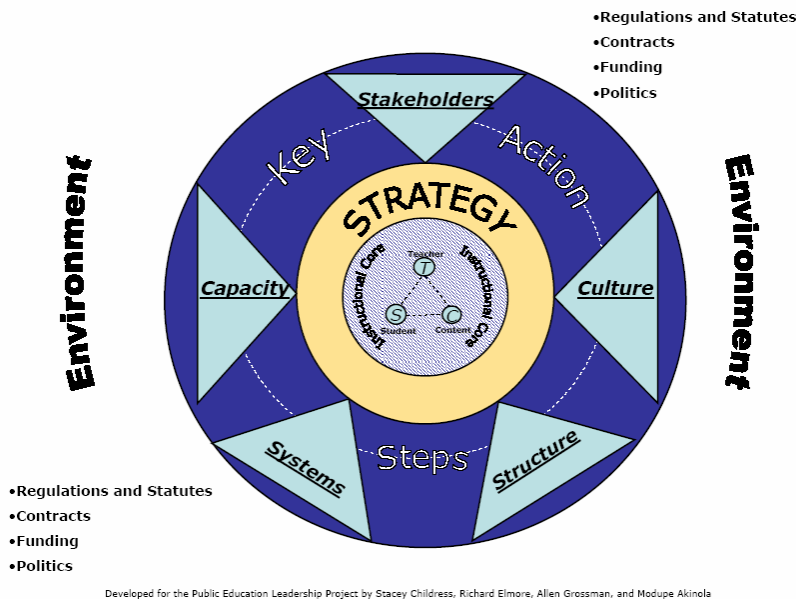
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- 1) Connecting the instructional core with a district-wide strategy and key action steps
- 2) Highlighting district elements that can support or hinder effective execution
- 3) Identifying interdependencies among district elements
- 4) Identifying forces in the environment relevant to executing strategy

Figure A below displays The PELP Coherence Framework (Also see **Exhibit 1**)

**Figure A**

Adapted from Tushman and O'Reilly 2002



At the center of the framework is the **instructional core**, defined as the relationship between teachers and students in the presence of content. Surrounding the core is **strategy** – the broad set of actions a district deliberately takes to provide capacity and support to the instructional core with the objective of raising student performance. Each district’s strategy might involve different approaches to providing this capacity and support. The framework, rather than prescribing a particular strategy, asserts that gaining coherence among actions at the district, school, and classroom levels will make a district’s strategy more powerful and sustainable. The outer ring of the framework includes a set of integrated **key action steps** defined by district leaders and implemented in order to execute the strategy.

The framework includes five organizational elements critical to the successful implementation of key action steps: **stakeholders, culture, structure, systems, and capacity**. The effectiveness of each of these elements is primarily under the direct control of district leadership. The outermost layer of the framework represents the **environment** in which districts operate and includes regulations and statutes, contracts, funding, and politics. These factors are primarily outside of the direct control of district leaders, but have the potential to greatly influence district strategy and operations.

## Mission, Objectives, and Milestones

In public school districts, setting performance objectives can be difficult. Districts face competing priorities and demands from multiple constituencies at the local, state, and federal level. In addition, unlike private sector organizations, school districts are designated producers of a public good in a particular geographic area and cannot choose to serve some customers and not others. Increasingly though, within these constraints, school district leadership teams are developing mission statements that target increased performance for *all* students, regardless of race, class, or prior academic performance as their primary objective. A concrete objective statement for such a mission might be: *By 2010, all students in the district will score in the proficient category or above on state reading and math tests, and there will be no gap between the performance of different ethnic groups and socio-economic classes.*

An ambitious long-term objective such as this can be made more manageable by setting intermediate milestones between the current performance and the desired state. Milestones for the one, three, and five year marks allow a district to monitor its progress toward the larger objective, communicate success along the way, and respond to new information as it becomes available. School districts must develop a strategy in order to fully achieve their objectives and the associated milestones. The following two sections discuss the relationship of strategy to the concepts of a theory of action and the instructional core, as well as characteristics of an effective strategy.

## Theory of Action and the Instructional Core<sup>2</sup>

Articulating an explicit theory of action<sup>3</sup> to link strategy to mission and objectives can be a useful first step in strategy formulation<sup>4</sup>. In this context, a theory of action represents the organization's collective belief about the causal relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes. Some find it useful to think of a theory of action as an "if...then..." statement, or a series of such statements.

In order to achieve their mission of increased performance for all students regardless of race, class, or prior academic performance, leaders in public schools districts are increasingly developing theories of action focused on improving the instructional core. The instructional core is the relationship between teachers and students in the presence of content. In focusing on this relationship as the basis of increased student achievement, school districts target their improvement efforts on providing capacity and support to the activities in the instructional core.<sup>5</sup>

For example, a number of districts that are heavily focused on professional development for teachers articulate their theory of action as: *"The most direct way to increase student learning is to improve teachers' instructional practice. Therefore, if all teachers improve their instructional practice, then we will accomplish high levels of achievement for all students."* This theory of action focuses strategy development by narrowing the range of choices to those actions that people in the district believe have the highest likelihood of increasing achievement levels for all students; namely, decisions that focus resources

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<sup>2</sup> This section is adapted from "Note on Strategy in Public Education", PEL-011.

<sup>3</sup> The term "theory of action" in this note is adapted from the work of Professor Chris Argyris of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and is similar to the concept of "theory of change" currently popular in nonprofit strategy and management.

<sup>4</sup> Other methods of strategy formulation exist; therefore "theory of action" does not appear explicitly on the framework graphic. For the purposes of this note, the authors use theory of action as one way to develop strategy.

<sup>5</sup> This conceptualization of the "instructional core" is articulated by Professor Richard F. Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and is based on the work of education scholar David Hawkins.

(people, financial and non-financial) on those activities aimed at improving the individual practice of all teachers throughout the district. The above is intended as one example of a prevalent theory of action – a district’s theory of action might be different from this example and be quite effective. Once a leadership team has agreed on a theory of action, they can develop a strategy to put the theory into practice.

## Strategy<sup>6</sup>

Strategy is the broad set of actions a district deliberately takes to provide capacity and support to the instructional core with the objective of raising student performance. These broadly defined actions lead to a set of specific steps that are related to each other and to the other elements of the framework. Strategy informs how the people, activities, and resources of a district work together to accomplish a collective purpose. If these pieces are organized well and the strategy is communicated clearly, the people doing the work are much more likely to understand how their efforts contribute to the overall purpose of the district. Strategy helps leaders choose what to do, and just as importantly, what *not* to do. As a result, the district can put its scarce resources to use more effectively.

Without a clear strategy, projects tend to be started one after the other, often moving on related, yet disconnected tracks. Programs are launched with fanfare and enthusiasm, and layered on top of existing programs that might not be effective and should have been stopped long ago. Strategy provides a sense of purpose, direction, and clarity to projects and programs, and connects them directly to the inspiring mission and objectives of the district. Often district leaders develop a strategy, but fail to engage others in its formulation or to communicate it effectively. The result is that the strategy remains largely in the heads of the senior managers, and never becomes embedded in the hearts and hands of the people on the front lines of the organization who are accountable for implementation. Effective strategy statements in districts vary widely, but share some common characteristics. A well-crafted and communicated strategy will include several of the following characteristics:

- **Connects to mission and objectives** – people responsible for executing the actions chosen by the district can readily see a link to the mission and objectives in their work
- **Provides focus** – people at all levels better understand who their “customers” are, what service they are providing to them, and why
- **Guides choices** – people throughout the organization can make better choices between possible activities, projects, and programs by assessing their fit with the strategy
- **Illuminates relationships** – people understand how their work relates to the work of others in the organization, and are able to recognize and take advantage of linkages and interdependencies to accomplish objectives
- **Defines measurement parameters** – people can work together to identify measures that are focused on the organizational learning necessary for continuous improvement of key action steps related to the strategy, and create and track indicators of performance relevant to successful execution of the strategy

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<sup>6</sup> This section is adapted from “Note on Strategy in Public Education”, PEL-011. Please refer to this note for a fuller discussion of the characteristics of effective strategy and its role in the public education sector.

- **Acknowledges the environment** – people are focused on the work of the organization, but understand how it links to the external context and the expectations of stakeholders
- **Allows for adaptation**– leaders in the organization are able to adapt the strategy as the organization learns about the effectiveness of actions through implementation and monitoring, and/or in response to changes in the environment

### *Strategy Statement Examples*

Districts develop strategies that fit their particular contexts and theories of action; therefore, many viable district-wide strategies exist. Below are two different strategy statements from large urban districts, both of which are producing results in increasing student performance and narrowing their respective achievement gaps between different races and socioeconomic classes.

**Example 1:** *In order to achieve excellence for all students, we will give parents a choice about where their children attend school; create classrooms all over the city that represented the diversity of the entire student population and in which teachers have high expectations for all learners; and place decisions about and accountability for instructional programs and the resources to support them in the hands of school communities.*

**Example 2:** *In order to attain high levels of achievement for all students in the district, we will build the capacity of all staff to take on a set of actions and attitudes about increasing student achievement through the use of a clear curriculum, access to and the use of student learning data, professional development, and accountability for results.*

Each example includes some of the characteristics of effective strategy mentioned on the previous page. Both reference the districts' student achievement objective; outline a related set of specific, yet broad actions focused on providing support and capacity to the instructional core; and inform useful performance indicators to monitor their effectiveness. Both also specify particular, yet significantly different, areas of focus to guide resources and decisions, such as parental choice and decentralized decisions in example one, and standardized curriculum and professional development in example two. If asked, the leadership teams from these two districts would likely articulate different theories of action. A district's chosen strategy might also be quite different from either of these examples and still be effective in raising student achievement. The above strategy statements are intended as representative approaches, and example two will be used as the starting point for examples of the other framework elements in the remainder of this note.

## **Key Action Steps**

Definition: The high-level yet specific actions the district must take in order to execute its strategy and accomplish its objectives

### *Critical Questions:*

- *What specific actions should we take to implement our strategy?*
- *Is the list of key action steps mutually exclusive, or are some key action steps on the list embedded in others?*

- *Is it possible to prioritize the list in order of importance?*
- *What initiatives are currently planned or underway related to these key action steps?*
- *Who has primary responsibility for accomplishing each action step?*

### ***Key Action Step Examples***

The following are examples of five key action steps for the strategy represented in example two on the previous page: *In order to attain high levels of achievement for all students in the district, we will build the capacity of all staff to take on a set of actions and attitudes about increasing student achievement through the use of a clear curriculum, access to and the use of student learning data, professional development, and accountability for results.*

1. Create a culture of accountability for results and the systems to build the capacity for operating within the culture.
2. Ensure that the relationship between and among curriculum, assessment, data, and effective practices are understood and utilized.
3. Differentiate how central office interacts with schools based on the school's achievement level and the capacity of the school's staff.
4. Infuse technology to improve quality, efficiency, capacity, and accountability for the work.
5. Simplify our strategic plan to drive systemic change and to create organizational coherence

The leadership team of this district identified five key action steps they determined were necessary for the effective execution of their strategy. The steps are essentially the strategy taken to the next degree of specificity. Once the key action steps are identified, the other elements – stakeholders, culture, structure, systems, capacity and the environment – can be assessed for their fit with each of the action steps. District leadership can then develop a plan for addressing elements that lack coherence. For clarity and simplicity, examples of framework elements in the remainder of this note are intended to be coherent with the first key action step above.

### **Stakeholders**

Definition: The people and groups that have a “stake” in the success of the district and the ability to influence its policies and practices

#### ***Critical Questions:***

- *Which stakeholders will be affected by the key action steps? Which stakeholders can have an impact on the implementation of the key action steps?*
- *Given the answers to the previous questions, how should we manage our stakeholder relationships in a way that is coherent with our key action steps and strategy?*

- *What relationship and /or contractual arrangement with our bargaining units would be most beneficial to executing our key action steps? What would it take to achieve this?*
- *How might we best communicate our progress to our stakeholders in a way that garners their support and their willingness to influence other stakeholders and the environment in ways that are coherent with our strategy?*

### **Stakeholder Categories**

- **District and school staff** – all paid employee groups throughout the organization
- **Governing bodies**– boards, committees, and/or political figures that set and administer district policies, e.g., board of education, mayor, local school site councils
- **Unions and associations** – local, state, and national collective bargaining units, e.g., teacher unions, administrator professional associations, custodial unions
- **Parents and parent organizations** – PTA, Parents for Public Schools, individual parents, parent volunteers
- **Civic and community leaders and organizations** – chambers of commerce, NAACP, politicians, local business leaders, local and national foundations

## **Culture<sup>7</sup>**

Definition: The predominant beliefs and norms that define and drive behavior in the district

### **Critical Questions:**

- *What beliefs underlie our theory of action and strategy?*
- *What beliefs currently exist in our stakeholder groups and how do those influence their behaviors?*
- *What behaviors are needed from people throughout the district to execute the key action steps?*
- *What norms should be established to support the necessary behaviors?*
- *How can we engage people in behaviors that will shape their beliefs about the ability of all kids to achieve at high levels?*

The concept of culture might seem abstract and difficult to diagnose and change. A district may have multiple sub-cultures, or be culturally atomized, as different schools or departments might have different norms and behaviors. Cultures evolve over time and often reflect the history of a district, as well as its current leadership. Culture is often underestimated or overlooked as an area in which

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<sup>7</sup> The sections on culture, structure and systems draw from M.L. Tushman and C.A. O'Reilly, *Winning Through Innovation*, Boston: HBS Press: 2002, M.L. Tushman and D.A. Nadler "A Model for Diagnosing Organizational Behavior," *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1980, and "Organizational Alignment: The 7S model," Jeff Bradach, HBS No. 497-045.

leaders can take specific action to reshape norms and behaviors, beyond simply developing a new list of shared values or beliefs.

For purposes of this note we define beliefs as individual and organizational notions of how the world works, and norms as the spoken and unspoken rules and patterns that drive behavior. An example of an explicit norm might be “We will be open and collaborative in improving instructional practice.” Reframing explicit norms might be relatively easy, while changing implicit norms and behaviors can be quite challenging. In reality, behavior in a district may differ considerably from articulated norms, often driven by differences between these stated norms and individual beliefs. For instance, rather than being open and collaborative, teachers may resist classroom observation and comment by others, and view feedback regarding their instructional techniques as inappropriate or demeaning.

Often times, the challenge for leadership is to engage people in specific behaviors that will reshape their existing individual beliefs about their own practice and student learning. Substantial empirical research on schools has indicated that “the effectiveness of districts, in terms of student learning and development, is significantly influenced by the quality and characteristics of district culture.”<sup>8</sup> Some examples of norms and beliefs to consider are: attitudes about accountability, orientation towards students and staff, conflict resolution methods, the reciprocity between the district office and schools, and the approach to stakeholders.

### ***Culture Example***

*To support a key action step of creating a culture of accountability for results and the systems to build the capacity for operating within the culture, a district would explicitly define the norms associated with a culture of accountability and the behaviors necessary at all levels of the district (teachers, principals, other administrators). Examples of norms might be: mutual respect, high expectations, collaborative problem solving, and the belief that all kids can perform at high levels. Examples of behaviors might be frequent observation and feedback in classrooms, collaborative review of student work, effective delivery of constructive feedback, and the separation of instructional coaching and formal performance evaluations.*

### **Structure**

Definition: The organizational arrangements and relationships that enable individuals to perform key action steps

#### ***Critical Questions:***

- *How do roles and responsibilities need to be defined to support our key action steps?*
- *Which reporting relationships would be most beneficial for executing our key action steps and our strategy? How can these relationships be made clear to everyone?*
- *How should decisions be made and by whom? What decisions should happen centrally? At the school level? In the classroom?*

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<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Owens, *Organizational Behavior in Education* (Needham Heights: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 175



- *Are temporary structures such as task forces and steering committees necessary to implement a key action step? If so, what is the ideal composition?*
- *What informal and formal communication networks are needed to implement key action steps?*

Structure helps define how the work of the district gets done. It includes how people are organized, who has responsibility and accountability for results, and who has the decision rights in a particular area. Structure can be both formal and informal.

**Formal Structure** Formal structures are deliberately established organizational forms that can be either relatively permanent or temporary. Examples of permanent structures are departments reflected on an organizational chart or standing groups such as the superintendent's cabinet. Temporary structures are time-limited, as is often the case with task forces or cross-functional teams established to plan or implement a new project or program.

Structural decisions can often hinder rather than support effective execution of key action steps. For example, many districts separate the organizational units that deliver professional development from the line management and accountability structures between the district and the schools. This arrangement makes it difficult to hold principals accountable for the professional development activities in their own schools, and for principals to hold professional developers accountable for school level objectives.

**Informal Structure** Informal structures can be as powerful as formal structures, and often emerge through social networks and communication patterns. Analyzing a school district's communication patterns is the easiest way to identify informal structures and sources of power. Asking questions such as, "Who do you go to when you really need to get something done?" or "How do things *really* work in the district?" can help reveal informal structures.

While formal power is primarily based on rank or position, informal power is garnered through social networks. Informal power can be difficult to manage because it is usually earned or developed through tenure, expertise or competence.<sup>9</sup> District leadership can have some influence over informal power by creating developmental committee assignments and job rotations, which allow individuals to gain informal power.

Informal power is especially important when teamwork and interdependence are crucial for execution. If a district's strategy hinges on collaboration, it is important for the leadership team to have an understanding of the informal power in the district as this power will need to be leveraged or re-configured in order to accomplish the key action steps.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, informal power can play a crucial role when implementing a potentially controversial initiative. Those with informal power may have substantial influence over the behavior of others, and could hinder successful implementation.

### ***Structure Example***

*To support a key action step of creating a culture of accountability for results and the systems to build the capacity for operating within the culture, a district should clearly define the responsibilities of*

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<sup>9</sup> See Linda A. Hill, "Influence as Exchange," HBS No. 497-049 for a discussion of networks and sources of informal power.

<sup>10</sup> See W.E. Baker, *Networking Smart: How to Build Relationships for Personal and Organizational Success*, New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1994 for examples of proactive and explicit strategies used to manage informal networks.

*each individual role in the district, make explicit where the authority for certain decisions reside and the logic for assigning such authority, and clarify who is accountable to whom for performance measures. Formal organizational structures should then reflect these expectations.*

## Systems

Definition: The processes and procedures used to manage the district

### *Critical Questions:*

- *What systems are needed to support each key action step?*
  - ❖ *performance evaluation*
  - ❖ *training and development*
  - ❖ *compensation*
  - ❖ *resource allocation*
  - ❖ *organizational learning and continuous improvement*
  - ❖ *others*

School districts manage themselves through a variety of systems, which are the routine means by which objectives are accomplished. Some systems are formally designed by the district, and others emerge informally in practice by those doing the daily work. Whether formal or informal, the purpose of systems is to increase the district's efficiency and effectiveness in implementing strategy. Systems are built around such important functions as career development and promotion, compensation, student assignment, resource allocation, and measurement and accountability.

School districts also must develop systems to comply with myriad external requirements even if these systems do not drive strategy. For instance, statewide assessments and federal regulations such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and desegregation legislation have required that school districts develop systems and processes to address these external demands. The emphasis on accountability has also put pressure on districts to develop complex systems to better track and manage student and staff performance.

### *Systems Example*

*To support a key action step of creating a culture of accountability for results and the systems to build the capacity for operating within the culture, a district should carefully design its data collection and analysis system to provide accurate and relevant performance information, and link this information system to a clear and consistent performance management system designed to reinforce individual accountability for results and continuous improvement.*

## Capacity

Definition: The resources required to implement key action steps and execute strategy

### *Critical Questions:*

- *What new skills and knowledge do district and school staff needs to develop and which ones do they need to “unlearn” to implement the key action steps?*
- *What role will the district play in helping individuals develop the new knowledge and skills?*
- *What financial resources are necessary to support the key action steps?*
- *What non-financial resources are necessary? Information technology, physical infrastructure, time, other?*

School districts employ three categories of resources: 1) People – individuals who work in the district, whether paid or volunteers, and their knowledge and skills, 2) Financial – cash and cash equivalents, 3) Non-Financial – other assets such as facilities, technology, time, and information

**People** Effective execution of key action steps requires individuals throughout the district with the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform their roles at the highest level. For example, in addition to the skills that teachers must possess for direct instruction, districts must also consider their competencies for other important tasks such as the analysis and use of data for instructional decision-making.

**Financial Resources** School district funds are typically divided into two categories, general funds, used for any purpose, and restricted or categorical funds, allocated to designated purposes. In most districts, 80% to 90% of the general fund is allocated to employee salaries and benefits, leaving only 10% to 20% of general funds available for non-payroll related activities. Recently districts have obtained waivers to use categorical funds to meet broader needs. School districts not only rely on federal, state, and local sources of funding but supplement these sources with bond issues and private fundraising.

School districts have to consider a number of complex factors when making their annual capital allocation decisions. For example, funding is often linked to the economy and may vary based on the prevailing economic climate. Additionally, fluctuations in enrollment from year to year and NCLB and other requirements make annual budgeting and planning particularly challenging.

**Non-Financial Resources** Non-financial resources are other district assets and capabilities, which include technology, information, facilities, and instructional and management expertise. Non-financial resources are typically built over time and are possessed by the district as a whole, not by any one individual. Time is a key, scarce non-financial resource, and one of the most challenging to manage at all levels of school districts.

### *Capacity Example*

*To support a key action step of creating a culture of accountability for results and the systems to build the capacity for operating within the culture, a district should ensure that teachers have time to participate in professional development specifically targeted at building the knowledge and skills*

*necessary to operating in a culture of accountability for results, and that principals develop the supervision skills necessary to inculcate the accountability culture in their buildings. The district might also choose to redirect financial resources from other activities to support these efforts.*

## Environment

A district's environment includes all of the external factors that can have an impact on strategy, operations and performance. The environment can have an impact on districts by enforcing nonnegotiable demands, constraining decision making, limiting resources, evaluating performance, and imposing sanctions. However, the environment can also serve as an enabler if district leadership can influence these regulatory and statutory, contractual, financial, and political forces that surround them.

District leaders must consider the factors in the environment and determine how those factors, singly or collectively, create demands, constraints, or opportunities that have an impact on their ability to implement their strategy.<sup>11</sup> The categories of the environment in the Coherence Framework are:<sup>12</sup>

1. **Regulations and statutes**—legal and regulatory influences on the district, e.g., board election policies, mandates from state departments of education, *No Child Left Behind* legislation
2. **Contracts** – agreements between the district and various bargaining units that have an impact on strategy and operations
3. **Funding** – all sources of revenue available to the district, both public and private, including local and state tax levies, categorical funds for state and federal programs, and grants from individuals and foundations
4. **Politics** – the political landscape in which the district operates, including local governance dynamics, the relative power of special interest groups, state-wide debates regarding issues such as choice and accountability, and electoral politics at the local, state and federal levels

## Conclusion

The PELP Coherence Framework is designed to focus the attention of public school district leaders on the central problem of increasing the achievement levels of all students by making the key actions and elements of large districts work in concert with the strategy. The framework can be useful when evaluating or changing an existing strategy, as well as when developing a new one. By providing a common language and consistent way of addressing the challenge of coherence, the Coherence Framework can help leaders create high-performing school districts that are responsive to the increasing external demands for accountability.

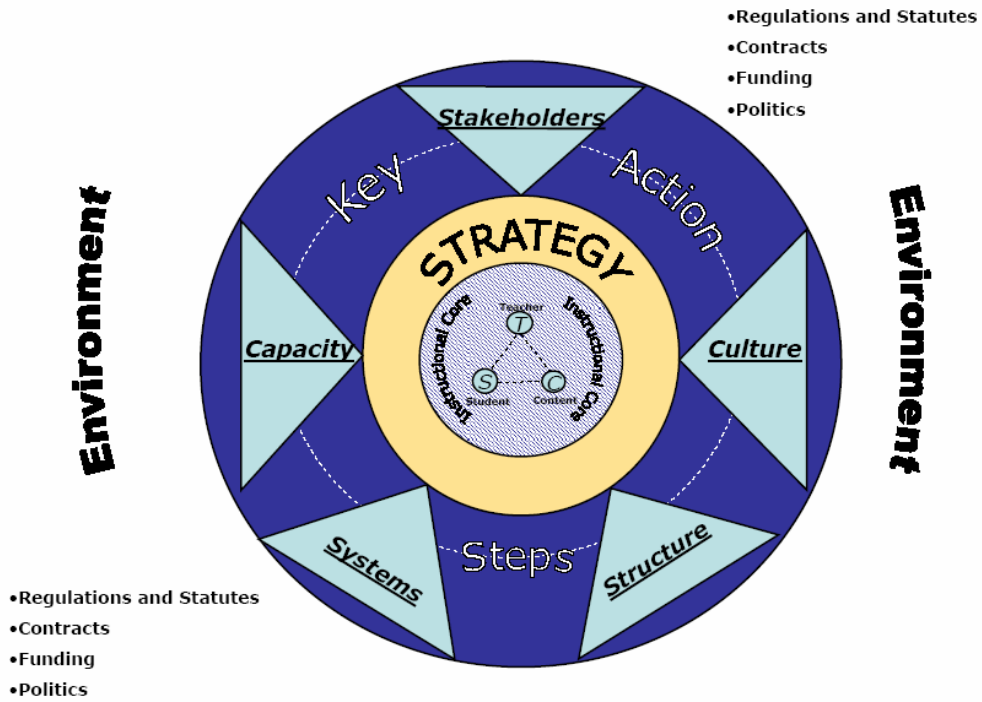
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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from M.L. Tushman and D.L. Nadler, "A Model for Diagnosing Organizational Behavior," *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1980, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Please note that the examples are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to clarify some of the categories of environmental factors that exist in public education.

Exhibit 1 PELP Coherence Framework

Adapted from Tushman and O'Reilly 2002



Developed for the Public Education Leadership Project by Stacey Childress, Richard Elmore, Allen Grossman, and Modupe Akinola