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Site-Based Leadership for Improving Instruction

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Site-Based Leadership for Improving Instruction

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Abstract

This article argues that a principal's actions can create site-based conditions that can grow a staff's capacity to improve instruction, depending on how a principal conceives of, organizes, and structures learning opportunities for teachers. The article analyzes the leadership of one principal as an example of how leaders can develop instructional capacity to improve teaching and learning. A conceptual framework is presented that defines instructional capacity and offers an approach for its development.

Key words: *instructional improvement, leadership, learning communities.*

The principal of Cedar Bridge Middle School, Seymore Everett, had a strong desire to create a school environment that nurtured the development of students and faculty alike. His belief in the value of a supportive learning environment for students was firmly rooted in his own experiences growing up in an environment where the adults around him cared for him and helped him to succeed:

It wasn't like I had fabulous teachers. It wasn't like I was the smartest kid in the world, but it was everything around me [that] supported me that allowed me to be successful.

Everett wanted to provide a nurturing learning environment for the students in his urban public middle school, many of whom lived in high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods. He wanted to create an environment where students could experience success and learn how to succeed.

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Names of the school and people used in this article are pseudonyms.

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Cedar Bridge had the undesirable distinction of being labeled “a Program Improvement School” in 2007 for the fourth consecutive year. According to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, all Title I–funded schools that did not make adequate yearly progress on their math and reading test scores were identified for Program Improvement. To be released from Program Improvement required student test scores to improve at the state-approved rate for all subgroups (e.g., African American, Latino, English language learner) in both math and reading for two consecutive years. Striving to improve student test scores, therefore, could become an all-consuming endeavor for Title I schools. In many such schools, a daily regimen of test preparation was adopted.

At Cedar Bridge, however, educators did not believe that relentless test preparation was best for the students. Everett and many of his colleagues viewed the state test as a limited and narrow measure of student learning in mathematics, reading, and writing. As Cedar Bridge entered its fourth year of Program Improvement, there was no question that its students—particularly the African American students, who were chronically the lowest-performing and least-improving student group in the school—needed to accelerate their learning. Everett shared:

When I got to my first year in administration [in 2004] ... I remember everything was about tests, tests, tests, tests. Every goal was about test, test, test, test: How is this going to help our test? Everything was about the test.

Now, it's kind of come back full circle. It's like, you know what, the numbers on tests will come if you have created an environment that supports the entire child, supports all the adults at school; and if you do that, test scores [will improve]. Now are they going to be at the top of the list? Maybe not, but they will improve. And it's not all about the test. I mean, I know my job is all about tests and it depends on it, but as I said, it will come. Test scores will come if you create that environment.

Troubled by the state's singular focus on standardized test scores as the sole measure of student learning, Everett was determined to cultivate a learning environment that was nurturing and supportive of students and teachers alike, and one where teachers and students were protected from the test-and-punish milieu that existed in the state.

Working With Teachers to Improve Instruction

Deeply committed to ensuring that all the students at Cedar Bridge learned and received a high-quality education, Everett knew that Cedar Bridge needed to find a way to help teachers enable students to learn more. How exactly to do this presented a real challenge. Already a highly collaborative school, what conditions and supports could Cedar Bridge develop beyond what was already in place to enable teachers to teach their subject-area content to students in a more effective manner? And how could Cedar Bridge better leverage the instructional knowledge and expertise of its most highly skilled and experienced teachers to support their colleagues' learning—particularly those who were less effective as teachers, new to the profession, less knowledgeable about their subject content, or less aware of their students' individual needs?

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As a former teacher in the district and former assistant principal at Cedar Bridge, Everett had enormous respect for the teachers' knowledge, for the complexity of teaching and learning, and for the enormous challenges inherent in educating students well, especially students who come from diverse backgrounds with few supports in the home. Aware of the complexity and challenges of teaching, Everett believed in and relied on a team approach to leading instruction at Cedar Bridge. He distributed leadership responsibilities among teachers and administrators. For instance, he established a School Leadership Team composed of department chairs and administrators to serve as an advisory group on schoolwide matters, including instruction. This group met regularly and provided input on professional development activities. He also created other formal leadership roles for teachers (e.g., work as a part-time librarian for one teacher and a formal teacher mentor role for another), and he provided them with release time to conduct their leadership responsibilities. Finally, Everett selected administrative leaders (e.g., an assistant principal in-training and an instructional coach) from the pool of strong teacher leaders that Cedar Bridge cultivated, just as his predecessor had done previously.

Given Everett's leadership style and beliefs, it is not surprising that Cedar Bridge had a variety of collaborative structures—monthly department meetings, weekly subject-area grade-level team meetings, and regular School Leadership Team meetings. However, none of these structures was explicitly focused on examining student work for evidence of student learning or on ensuring the instruction would lead to the desired learning outcomes. Instead, as in many schools, teachers typically used their meeting time to plan units of study. According to one teacher, the focus of most meetings was, "More planning. More planning. More planning. But then we never look at what's produced with ... a critical eye." For her, looking for evidence of student learning "is the part that gets left out all the time." Everett wanted to change that. He wanted teachers to examine the evidence of student learning and figure out how to teach differently so kids learned more. He saw the need for this to become the focus of teachers' conversations.

Focusing Teachers on Evidence of Student Learning

With input from teachers and the School Leadership Team, a team of administrators, including the instructional coach, worked together to design and structure a series of teacher conversations centered on student learning. The purpose of this site-based professional learning was to provide a context in which teachers would be supported to look together at evidence of student learning, the instruction that led to that learning, and ways to redesign instruction to help students who were not learning. The design of this professional learning involved every teacher and administrator.

Initially, the Administrative Team wanted teachers to examine standardized test score data for patterns and trends that could inform teachers' instruction. This focus on standardized test item analysis, however, was quickly discarded when teachers spoke up and said that test score data from months ago was not particularly relevant or instructionally useful. Everett recalled:

I especially remember the eighth-grade language arts team, but all the teams [felt] ... this was two months' worth of information. How the hell am I supposed to decide ... [when] there's many different things the kids need.

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Some people kept saying, “I’m getting this information now in November; and if I knew it back in September, I could have done something about it. But it’s not realistic. It’s not meaningful to go back.”

We started looking into formative assessments because people were realizing we’re waiting for these district benchmarks or the [standardized test scores]; they’re too late. They’re summative; it’s way too much information; it’s too late. I need something from the lesson I taught today, so if I need to go back, I can. That was a key piece this year—of how important a formative assessment can be, and it doesn’t have to be something complicated. It could be an academic paragraph; it could be an observation where kids do stuff on the whiteboard. I think that was a big “ah hah.”

The Administrative Team acted quickly upon this feedback from teachers and discontinued the practice of looking at standardized test score data. They replaced test score data with teacher-selected examples of students’ daily classroom work.

Reframing What Counts as Evidence of Student Learning

For Everett, changing the type of data that teachers looked at to assess student learning and giving authority to teachers to determine what that data would be was a powerful shift in his own thinking and in the way Cedar Bridge staff thought about what counted as evidence of student learning. Everett described Cedar Bridge’s explicit focus on student learning and its representation as a “shift” in the way the school organized its professional development. He said he wanted teachers to focus “on what kids are learning” rather than on what the teachers were teaching:

We want to start moving toward evaluating student work. Yes, we’re teaching the standard—and we can have a discussion about how we’re going to teach it; but then let’s bring the work back. Let’s bring some students’ samples back, whether it’s multiple choice, essays, [or] projects. Let’s look at [the work] together: Are kids learning? Are they not learning? What are they missing? What kinds of kids are missing certain things? And then decide our [instructional] decisions [and] our next steps after we find out whether or not the kids are learning. Because, typically, you never look at did the kids learn? You give the grades, and you move on.

Teachers were asked and expected to monitor students’ progress on classroom assignments and to conduct routine checks for understanding in the course of daily instruction.

Creating a Structure to Support Teachers’ Learning

Beginning in November, Cedar Bridge initiated an all-staff Professional Learning Cycle to support teachers in monitoring students’ learning. The focus of these meetings revolved around four essential questions: (a) What is it that we want students to learn? (b) How will we know if students have learned it? (c) What will we do if students do not learn? (d) What will we do if they do? These questions were based on the work of Richard DuFour (see DuFour, 2004), particularly a DuFour conference the principal and assistant principal attended on professional learning communities. Teachers were organized into small groups by their grade-level and subject-matter teaching assignments.

| |
|---|
| PLC First Meeting in Cycle <i>Cedar Bridge Middle School Professional Development</i> “This work should be relevant and manageable.” |
| Essential Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is it that we want students to learn?• How will we know if students have learned it? |
| PLC Group Members: _____ |
| What is the learning objective for your targeted lesson? |
| What instructional strategy or strategies will you use? |
| Please attach your formative assessment. |

Figure 1. PLC worksheet.

These small groups became known as professional learning community groups (PLCs). Cedar Bridge staff members believed it was their responsibility to create an environment in which each student could learn, and the administration saw a close connection between designing a meaningful learning environment for teachers and creating a supportive learning environment for students.

Making time for teachers to learn was one important way that Cedar Bridge administrators supported and valued teachers’ learning. Regular professional development time was provided in the form of district-granted “double minimum days,” which enabled Cedar Bridge teachers to reappportion staff meeting time so that teachers met during three afternoons in a single week, across five weeks between November and May. This staff learning time was devoted to teachers’ collaborative assessment of student work followed by joint lesson planning and reassessment of students’ learning.

The professional learning cycle usually began on a Monday afternoon with a one-hour faculty meeting. As the PLC worksheet shown in Figure 1 indicates, teams of teachers were asked to jointly identify a common “learning objective” for the week and then construct a common lesson plan to teach that learning objective to students. In the second meeting of the cycle, teachers were provided with a tool to help them make sense of their formative assessment results (see Figure 2).

During this sequence of meetings, rich opportunities for learning were created as teachers and administrators examined student work samples, such as essays, performances, and answers to questions (Jaquith, 2013). Teachers and administrators discussed evidence of student learning, including what evidence counted as an indication of understanding. Such close examination of student work prompted teachers to ask questions of one another to tease out the nuances of how instruction was delivered. Teachers realized that even when they jointly designed learning goals and an instructional plan, the actual instruction varied as teachers responded to particular students’ needs and exercised judgment in the process of teaching.

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| |
|---|
| PLC Second Meeting in Cycle |
| PLC Group Members: _____ |
| What were the results of the formative assessment that you gave? |
| What specific difficulties did students have with the material they were supposed to learn? |
| Which students and how many students had those difficulties? |
| What specific instructional strategies are you going to use to address the learning of those students who had difficulty? When? |

Figure 2. Formative assessment results tool.

Creating a Structure to Support Administrators' Learning

Outside of the teacher PLC meetings, the Administrative Team members created an analogous learning opportunity for themselves: to look at work teachers produced in the PLC meeting for evidence of how teachers thought about what counts as an indication of student understanding and how skilled teachers were at redesigning instruction if students were not learning.

At each PLC meeting, teachers participated in a carefully designed, sequenced set of activities. Embedded in these activities were instructional design and reflection routines that mapped out an approach teachers could take: (a) to choose an understanding goal for instruction; (b) to design a lesson for building understanding of that goal with a built-in mechanism for collecting information about students' learning (e.g., a formative assessment); (c) to examine the student work (e.g., formative assessment) for evidence of student understanding; and (d) to design a new lesson(s) to meet the needs of students who did not demonstrate sufficient understanding of the learning goal.

Using Formative Assessments to Design for More Effective Learning

The Administrative Team used teachers' responses to these activities to look together at the work the teacher teams produced. They provided specific feedback to individual teacher teams, and they used the evidence of teachers' understanding of the instructional design process to inform their own planning of the next professional learning cycle meeting. In this way, the administrators developed their own formative assessment tool and accompanying set of practices. Looking together at teachers' joint work stimulated a learning process that enabled the Administrative Team to discover what teachers wanted students to learn, how teachers thought about evidence of student understanding, and how skilled teachers were in the process of redesigning instruction as opposed to simply reteaching the same lesson. Determining how to guide teachers' selection of meaningful learning goals, or how to support teachers to analyze student work for demonstrated evidence of student understanding was difficult and time-consuming work for the Cedar Bridge administration. But they valued this work and made time for it.

During one such session early on, the administrators discovered that many teachers had difficulty examining student work for evidence of understanding that would yield useful information about how teachers could reteach or reframe a concept. This realization

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emerged when administrators looked at a math team's response to the question: What specific instructional strategies are you going to use to address the learning of those students who had difficulty? When they looked at the math team's worksheet from the second meeting in the cycle, one administrator remarked:

This is this group's answer: "If 80% of the students pass the exit slip [a quick student assessment conducted at the end of a class], we feel we've been successful and we'll try to get the other students whenever possible." ... Which means that [the teachers] aren't going to get to [those students]. I'd like to know the specifics: What will they do, when, how? What do the students need?"

Teaching effectively to 80% of the students was not good enough. The administrators wanted teachers to hone in on how to teach more effectively to the 20% of the students who were struggling to understand the material as it was currently taught. The administrators collectively wrestled with how to help teachers modify their instruction to meet the needs of these students all year. They developed new strategies for working with teachers, which they tried out in the PLC meetings. Thus, the administrators engaged in their own professional learning process that mimicked the teachers' experience. They applied the four essential questions inspired by DuFour to their leadership of the teachers' PLC work. As they did so, the administrators realized that their debriefing meetings were a critical part of leading professional learning that required its own dedicated block of time.

By working with and learning from teachers about how best to design, use, and reflect on the learning that occurred during these professional learning meetings, the Cedar Bridge staff saw how formative assessments could provide evidence of learning and guide instructional design. And the administrators saw that they, too, needed formative assessments to support teachers. What mattered was how these formative assessments were used to make instructional decisions.

What Conditions Enable Instructional Learning?

At Cedar Bridge, as in all schools, there are many circumstances that affect the way educators work, the manner in which teachers work together, and how effectively they teach. Accumulating research evidence shows that the professional capacity of a teaching staff, which according to Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) includes the "combination of skills, beliefs, dispositions, and work arrangements of teachers at the school" (p. 54), affects the overall quality of teaching and learning in a school.

A recent study of Chicago high schools that used measures of principal leadership and school organizational structures found that across high schools, "The degree to which principals are successful at creating a strong learning climate in the school seems to be the most important way in which they influence the average quality of instruction in the school" (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012, pp. 642–643). In addition, when these researchers looked at measures within individual schools, they found that principals influence the instructional quality of individual teachers in a variety of other ways, but most significantly through "program quality, which is defined as the quality of professional development and

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program coherence” (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012, p. 643). Case studies (e.g., Little & Horn, 2007; Scanlan, 2013) also show how teachers’ participation in a community of practice focused on learning can promote changes in practice. Therefore, a principal’s actions have the potential to create site-based conditions that can grow a staff’s capacity to improve instruction, depending on how a principal conceives of, organizes, and structures learning opportunities for teachers.

What Conditions Enabled Instructional Learning at Cedar Bridge?

At Cedar Bridge, the principal made specific changes that created conditions conducive to learning. For example, Everett used organizational structures to foster teacher collaboration and to promote a variety of ways that teachers could act as leaders. The PLC meetings were aimed at developing a shared repertoire of instructional practice with demonstrated evidence of student learning. In addition, Everett defined a learning purpose for teacher meetings: What are students learning and how do we know? He selected and adjusted the content of those meetings (e.g., replaced standardized test score data with classroom formative assessments) so that the focal content was better aligned to the defined learning purpose.

With input from the School Leadership Team, Everett also modified the staff meeting structure—meeting in subject-area, grade-level teams several times across a single week, multiple times during the year. He did so because the existing staff meeting structures, where grade-level teachers met once a week for an hour or once a month in departments, were ill-suited to support teachers developing the practice of looking together at formative assessments from their classes and jointly designing instruction based upon their analysis of that assessment. To be meaningful and doable, this new professional practice required setting aside time for several meetings during a single week of instruction.

In these ways, Everett paid attention to four important context dimensions—the learning purpose, the participants’ learning needs, the content of the learning, and its structure or design—and recognized their interdependence. The professional development research literature (e.g., Wilson & Berne, 1999) indicates that when these four dimensions of the context are attended to in the design of a learning experience, conditions are created that make learning more likely to occur.

Four Context Dimensions That Matter for Learning

A framework that provides a conceptual lens for thinking about how the conditions for learning are created, called the Instructional Capacity Building Framework (Jaquith, 2009), identifies these four context dimensions that need intentional consideration when planning for learning to occur (see Figure 3). Depicted in the outer box, these context dimensions are: purpose (*why*), participants (*who*), content (*what*), and structure (*how*). These four context dimensions are interrelated in complex and dynamic ways, as the Cedar Bridge example indicates.

The two-way arrows connecting these four dimensions to one another are intended to represent these interrelationships. For instance, in the context of a classroom, imagine that a teacher’s instructional purpose will influence the particular content she selects to teach

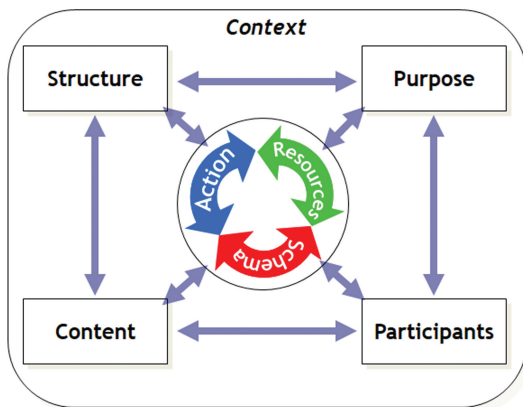


Figure 3. Instructional capacity building framework (Jaquith, 2009).

and how she approaches her instruction. Also imagine that each of these instructional decisions will be made with the particular students in mind. In other words, in a classroom of English language learners versus a classroom of Advanced Placement English students, the teacher will probably select different content and structure her lesson differently, even if her instructional purpose for both lessons (e.g., to teach students how to develop an evidence-based argument about a text) is essentially the same.

Instructional Resources That Facilitate Learning

The framework also defines four categories of instructional resources—instructional technology, which are the methods and tools used for teaching and knowledge of how to use them; instructional knowledge; instructional relationships; and organizational resources pertaining to instruction (see Table 1). A school needs all four types of instructional resources to create conditions where learning is likely to occur. In addition, the use of one instructional resource typically implies the need for the other types of instructional resources.

At Cedar Bridge, for example, subject-area and grade-level teacher teams not only used their classroom formative assessments to look for evidence of student learning, but they also needed to use their instructional knowledge to assess the quality of student learning and

Table 1. Typology of Instructional Resources.

| Instructional technology | Instructional organizational resources | Instructional relationships | Instructional knowledge |
|--|---|--|---|
| Methods (i.e., routines, frameworks) Tools (i.e., devices) Materials (i.e., texts, curriculum, assessments) | Structures (i.e., department meetings) Roles (i.e., instructional coach, department chair) Leadership (i.e., Instructional Leadership Team) Procedures (i.e., organizational routines that focus on instruction) | Qualities of the relationship: Trust, respect, integrity, and awareness of instructional expertise | Expertise: Subject-area content, pedagogy, students |

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an organizational structure (e.g., structured time) to support their collective examination of the formative assessment. The PLC meetings provided this instructional organizational resource. To look productively at student work with colleagues, Cedar Bridge teachers needed to have, or to develop, a sufficient level of trust and awareness of one another's instructional knowledge so they could learn through shared practice.

How Cedar Bridge Developed Its Instructional Capacity

At Cedar Bridge, Everett defined the learning purpose for teachers during the staff meeting: "to focus on non-summative assessments to figure out exactly [what and] how students are learning." Given this declared learning purpose, the content of the PLC staff meetings ultimately became looking together at artifacts of students' class work for evidence of student learning. However, this was not the approach that Everett initially selected to use at the PLC meetings.

The Instructional Capacity Building Framework offers a conceptual lens for understanding how Cedar Bridge developed its capacity for improving instruction. At the center of the framework, a cycle of activity is depicted (see Figure 3). This cycle of activity, called *instructional resourcing*,¹ involves the identification and selection of an instructional resource, and theorizes that by putting that resource into use in a manner that pays attention to the four context dimensions, its use will stimulate the use or creation of additional instructional resources (Jaquith, 2009). This framework offers a way to think about what happens in a particular context to create the conditions in which that instructional resource becomes more or less likely to get used. The framework also posits that through its use, the creation or use of other instructional resources is likely to occur. As more instructional resources are generated and then put into use, the instructional capacity of an environment can increase.

The case of Cedar Bridge provides an example of how instructional resourcing works in practice. Initially, Everett tried to use standardized test score data (one type of instructional technology) to foster teachers' development of instruction that would better meet students' learning needs. As teachers tried to use the test score data, the most accomplished teachers at Cedar Bridge complained that these data were not useful for this particular purpose. Everett listened and understood the difficulty that using those scores presented. Consequently, he helped to identify different instructional technology (in this case, classroom formative assessments) that was better suited to the learning needs of the teachers.

Identifying the right content that would best fit the learning purpose for teachers involved a process of looking for evidence of teachers' learning as they used the instructional technology, and then fitting this instructional resource to the particular learning needs of the participants. In this particular situation, trying to productively use the identified instructional technology—test scores—led to the identification and selection of a different

¹The construct of *resourcing* comes from organizational scholar Martha Feldman (2004). She defines this concept as "the creation in practice of assets such as people, time, money, knowledge, or skill; and qualities of relationships such as trust, authority, or complementarity such that they enable actors to enact schemas" (p. 296).

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instructional technology (e.g., teacher-designed formative assessments), which was not at first considered a resource for teachers' collective learning.

Importantly, the recognition of teacher-designed classroom assessments as useful data about student learning and the decision to use these formative assessments in place of standardized test score data marked a "shift" in Everett's thinking about what counted as evidence of student learning. In the language of the Instructional Capacity Building Framework, this shift in thinking marked an important shift in "schema"—in how Everett thought about what represented evidence of student learning and the sort of evidence that could be used. As the variety of representations of student learning increased in the PLC meetings, shifts in teachers' schema also occurred.

Fitting the use of instructional resources to the context dimensions builds instructional capacity. This *fitting* process, which involves negotiating the meaningful use of a resource within a particular context, stimulated the creation of new professional learning tools, materials, and processes at Cedar Bridge. For example, teachers designed formative assessments together. Administrators developed materials, such as the PLC worksheets for the meeting cycles, and processes for examining student work as well as teachers' work.

As the Administrative Team sought to fit this sequence of professional learning practices into teachers' workplace realities and make the work "meaningful and relevant," Everett shared, the school created new organizational structures, such as the redistributed use of staff time, specifically configured for this learning purpose. During five weeks across six months, teachers met for three afternoons in a single week to enact this cycle of learning focused on their instructional practice. For the other 19 weeks, teachers did not meet as a whole staff. For some, this redistribution of teacher meeting time also represented a shift in schema about what was possible for the use of staff time. Cedar Bridge administrators also discovered a need for a different type of meeting time for themselves—regular time to look together at teachers' instructional work.

Finally, through this process of designing a professional learning experience to achieve a specific learning goal and then fitting the approach to do so into the specific Cedar Bridge context, trust grew between administrators and teachers. Trust increased when the practice of looking at standardized test scores was discontinued quickly. Recognition of one another's instructional expertise grew among grade-level, subject-area teachers as they participated in the practice of looking together at student work samples from one another's classes. Trust grew among teachers and between teachers and administrators as they engaged in meaningful and deliberate work together.

Conclusion

While the research literature does little to specify what a principal, or others, can actually do to organize and structure teachers' learning, the case of Cedar Bridge Middle School and the Instructional Capacity Building Framework are helpful in this regard. *Instructional capacity* in this context refers to the collection of resources for teaching that a district, school, or grade-level team has to support instruction and, most importantly, to the ability to effectively *use* these resources to engage students and deepen their learning (Jaquith, 2009,

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2013). This definition of *instructional capacity* encompasses Bryk et al.'s (2010) definition of *professional capacity* and further specifies it.

By defining *instructional capacity* and how it is generated, Cedar Bridge offers one way to think about how schools can create the conditions for continuous instructional improvement. The Instructional Capacity Building Framework provides a conceptual lens for thinking about both the dimensions of the context that matter for learning as well as what needs to happen in that context for learning about instruction to occur.

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