Focus Schools:

Nurturing Success in Every Student

MICHIGAN Department of Education

Michigan State Board of Education

John Austin, President, Ann Arbor

Casandra Ulbrich, Vice President, Rochester Hills

Daniel Varner, Secretary, Detroit

Richard Zeile, Treasurer, Dearborn

Michelle Fecteau, NASBE Delegate, Detroit

Lupe Ramos-Montigny, Grand Rapids

Kathleen N. Straus, Detroit

Daniel Varner, Detroit

Eileen Lappin Weiser, Ann Arbor

Governor Rick Snyder, Ex Officio

Michael P. Flanagan, Chairman, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ex Officio

Michigan Department of Education Staff

Venessa Keesler Ph.D., Deputy Superintendent of Educational Services

Linda Forward, Director, Office of Educational Improvement and Innovation

Priority Schools: Reaching for Excellence, 1st Edition, © 2013

Funding for this publication was provided by the Michigan Department of Education, ESEA Title I, and MI Excel.

Dear Michigan Educator,

None of us is a stranger to achievement gaps; we know they exist in schools across our state and throughout the nation. Your work with one or more of Michigan's Focus schools provides you with an exciting opportunity to find effective solutions for addressing gaps locally, using customized approaches that fit your own unique populations.

Your work with Michigan's Focus schools provides you with an exciting opportunity to find effective solutions for addressing gaps locally.

This is intriguing work. It will tap into all that your school and district have to offer, highlighting areas of strength and potential, and giving your team the chance to think creatively together about new ways of connecting with learners. It is my hope that you find yourself invigorated by the possibility that your organization can not only grow stronger as a result, but also contribute substantially to our collective national effort to find a better way forward as we work to address achievement gaps.

The supports you will receive through MI Excel are second to none. State and local resources have been carefully chosen and deployed on your behalf, giving you access to high-quality research, dedicated experts, and robust opportunities for professional development and networking. Best of all, your team will be engaged in up-to-the-minute action research, using rich data sets, and making the most of the professional knowledge you and your colleagues share.

Your mission is simple: excellence and equity for all learners. The people of Michigan are behind you every step of the way.

Mike Flanagan
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Contents

4 Core Beliefs
5 A Framework for Change
8 What a Focus School Can Expect
10 Developing Effective Strategies for Success
12 How to make the most of MI Excel
16 Communicating About Change
18 Supplemental Reading List
19 Glossary of Terms

Reaching for Excellence

Not very long ago, the idea of believing that all children can succeed regardless of race or ethnicity, native language, poverty, or special needs was considered unlikely or even impossible. But research has shown, time and again, that this tenet is true: *Given the right supports and strategies, every child can learn to high standards*. Today, all educators are charged with the mission of creating a learning environment where every child can thrive. This is especially true of Michigan's Focus schools, where achievement gaps are significant.

Ensuring that all children learn at high levels will require Michigan's Focus schools to fine tune and customize their systems and practices. But they don't have to do it alone. MI Excel, Michigan's statewide system of support, is here to help.

What is MI Excel?

MI Excel is a system of support that offers technical assistance and capacity-building for Title I schools and districts as they transform. Today's MI Excel supports take the form of customized interventions that bring the best tools and resources to educators across the state.

"The finest gift we can give our children is our heartfelt belief that they can succeed."
- Dr. Lawrence W. Lezotte, Author & Educational Researcher

MI Excel has brought together a network of knowledgeable partners to work with local educational leaders, guided by the conviction that student achievement increases significantly when schools and districts:

- Understand the needs of the students they serve;
- Ensure instruction is customized to the needs of learners;
- Work together to build effective systems that ensure flexibility, resources, and support for students and adults alike.

In this publication, Title I Focus schools and districts can enrich their understanding of the approaches, strategies, and supports available through MI Excel during 2013–14.

Through MI Excel, Title I districts and schools are given the support they need to consistently deliver on our state's promise of excellence and equity for each and every learner.

Core Beliefs

The hallmark of Michigan's accountability structure is its consistent focus on the needs of learners. MI Excel partners believe:

- Each and every child can learn at high levels.
- Regardless of the challenges schools may have, schools are ultimately dedicated to delivering strong achievement results.
- The work of improving schools is both imperative and urgent.
- We must honor and build upon the skills, knowledge, and experiences of the professionals working in our schools and districts.
- MI Excel provides guidance and assistance, but it is school and district educators who engage in the real work of change. Schools and districts will always bear the primary responsibility of improving themselves.
- Substantial, lasting improvement comes from the coherent, ongoing use of professional learning and discussion, data-based inquiry, and targeted support.
- MI Excel will maintain the highest standards of excellence, care, competence, and reliability.

A Framework for Change

What are achievement gaps?

Achievement gaps are the observed differences in educational performance between various groups of students. A school as a whole may have above-average or high achievement, but when data are disaggregated, certain groups of students may exhibit much lower achievement.

State and federal accountability programs typically identify these groups as commonly impacted by achievement gaps:

- Socioeconomically disadvantaged students
- Students of color
- Students with disabilities
- English language learners

Focus schools have significant numbers of students from these subgroups who need additional support to succeed academically.

MI Excel, Michigan's statewide system of support, functions as part of a broader framework designed to grow achievement among all schools. State and federal accountability structures, resources, and requirements provide the path and tools necessary for schools to improve.

In Michigan, school improvement is a highly customized activity in which each Focus school's local context and needs are accommodated. This tailored approach allows MI Excel to complement the work of intermediate school districts and regional educational service agencies (ISD/RESAs), and support the involvement of other agencies as appropriate (e.g., charter school authorizers).

Focus Schools are designated as such because they fall within the 10 percent of Michigan schools with the largest achievement gaps between the upper 30 percent of students and the bottom 30 percent of students. Why is this important? The Michigan Department of Education says it best:

"It is clear that we cannot raise Michigan's overall performance until we identify our lowest student achievers and change our practices in ways that enable them to succeed."

Through MI Excel, school improvement activities and supports are all aimed at a single outcome: eliminating achievement gaps among subgroups of students, thus ensuring that all Michigan students, regardless of demographics, leave school career and college ready.

MDE Requirements for Focus Schools & Their Districts

During the first year in which one or more of its schools is identified as a Focus School, a district is required to ensure that an identified school:

1. Conducts a facilitated, diagnostic "data dialogue" to identify 1-2 major changes in teaching and learning practice capable of moving achievement levels among the lowest-performing students and post these conclusions in the AdvancED school improvement focus school diagnostic.

2. Revises its School Improvement Plan (SIP) (and, if necessary, the district's consolidated application for federal funding) to incorporate scaffolding of adult learning about and implementation of the selected new approaches to teaching/learning.

3. Strengthens, focuses, or deepens the fidelity of its multi-tiered system of support to differentiate learning processes for its lowest-performing students.

4. Participates in the Superintendent's Dropout Challenge by identifying 10-15 at-risk students and tracking the effectiveness of research-based supports and interventions.

At the same time, the district itself will:

5. Monitor the implementation of the school's selected improvement strategies.

6. Self-assess its own readiness to support its struggling schools differentially. Districts with Title I schools will use a Resource Allocation Check derived from the work of Education Resource Strategies, (ERS) which is available to all districts at no charge at *www.erstrategies.org/info/tools*, and will then upload the results from this self-assessment in ASSIST.

7. Identify any changes in district-level infrastructure systems that are needed to allow and/or support the school in implementing its teaching/learning changes.

8. Revise its District Improvement Plan (DIP) to specify 1-2 major changes in its school support system and at monitoring intervals on its implementation of these changes.
(taken from MDE's *FAQ About Michigan's Focus Schools*)

2013–14 Title I Funding Requirements—Districts

Focus schools that receive federal Title I dollars are required to use a portion of these funds to obtain additional support through MI Excel. However, a 2012 amendment to the state's ESEA flexibility waiver has changed how these set-asides are to be implemented.

Beginning in 2013–14, no district set-aside of LEA Title I funds is required during the first two years of Focus school identification. However, a district-level set aside is required during Year Three and beyond unless MDE determines the proficiency levels of the Focus school's bottom 30 percent of students have improved.

The required district set-aside during Year Three will be calculated as the sum of 10 percent of each non-improving Focus School's previous year Title I budget, up to a maximum 10 percent district set-aside. During Year Four, the district set-aside increases to 15 percent of each non-improving Focus School's previous year Title I budget, up to a maximum of 15 percent district set-aside.

Districts with Focus schools must use their district-level set-asides to support these schools in Years Three and Four by choosing one or both of the options below:

Option 1: Implement professional learning on research-based interventions aligned to the school's needs.

Option 2: Provide a multi-tiered system of support that includes scaffolded instruction of students in the lowest performing student groups if the school does not implement one. If the school implements such a system, deepen or broaden the scope or enhance the fidelity of implementation.

2013–14 Title I Funding Requirements—Schools

Beginning in 2013–14, Focus schools have no school-level set-asides during the first year of identification. There is, however, a 10 percent school-level set aside during Year Two and beyond, which the school must use to implement one or more of the following:

Option 1: Professional learning on implementation of a multi-tiered system of support and/or scaffolded instruction of students in the lowest performing student groups.

Option 2: Provide weekly/daily time for teacher collaboration.

Option 3: Contract for administration of Surveys of Enacted Curriculum.

Option 4: Contract with the local ISD/RESA or MDE for a school improvement review to provide an external perspective on processes to best support student achievement.

Option 5: Professional learning on implementation of Essential Elements for teachers with MI-ACCESS students in the bottom 30 percent.

Option 6: Culture/climate interventions, use of time analysis, or culturally responsive teaching interventions as needed.

Other Changes for 2013–14

Focus schools are required to send a letter to parents of students enrolled in the Focus school during the 2012-2013 school year, or anticipated by the district to enroll in a Focus school in the 2013-2014 school year, identifying the school as a Focus school. Also to be included in the letter are the reasons for its identification and the school's and district's plans to improve student achievement. MDE requires that this letter must be sent so parents receive it no later than August 20, 2013 or 10 days after the public release of the Top to Bottom list.

Please note the following additional information about the amended ESEA waiver effective with the 2013-2014 school year and applicable to Title I schools:

- Schools identified as Focus schools are no longer required to offer choice, transfer, and transportation options for students.
- Focus schools are no longer required to continue transportation for students whose parents had in 2012–13 chosen to transfer students under the choice/transfer option (districts and schools are encouraged to be sensitive to burdens this may place upon families and students affected by this change).
- Districts may elect to use Title I funds to provide or pay for the transportation costs of students choosing to attend a choice/transfer option school chosen for the 2013–2014 school year, or a school already elected in prior years. If elected, this option is not to be funded through the use of required set-asides.
- Districts may determine the amount of Title I funds for elected choice, transfer and transportation based upon locally determined need and anticipated actual costs for transportation.

MI Excel: Expert Resources for Customized, Intensive Support

MI Excel is focused on helping Title I schools and districts eliminate their achievement gaps. To ensure the success of Focus schools in Michigan, a robust array of supports has been provided in partnership with state and national school improvement experts.

Michigan State University Office of K–12 Outreach, housed within MSU's top-rated College of Education, provides local support to schools and districts. The college's active network of top education experts has been working in the field for decades to promote lasting performance at all levels of schooling, and has deep capabilities in serving the needs of Focus schools.

District improvement facilitators are experienced, knowledgeable educators who have been trained, prepared, and are employed by MSU K–12 Outreach. They are assigned to districts to help them identify opportunities for eliminating existing achievement gaps. Through data analysis and conversation, these facilitators collaborate with district and school leaders as they identify key priorities and allocate academic, human, and fiscal resources toward those priorities.

Additionally, MSU K–12 Outreach offers the services of trained professionals who understand the unique learning needs of student populations commonly affected by achievement gaps (e.g., students of color, students of poverty, English learners, special education students). These experts provide targeted professional development and training, technical assistance, and written resources that can help Focus schools address the needs of various student groups.

The **Michigan Department of Education** has forged a number of other strategic partnerships to actively deploy MI Excel, the statewide system of support. Major partners include the **Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA), AdvancEd, and Education Resources Strategies.** These strategic collaborations ensure customized and coherent support for school and district teams and provide access to high-quality information and resources.

What a Focus School Can Expect

Districts with one or more Focus schools receive notification of their status prior to the commencement of the 2013–14 school year. School improvement activities begin at that time, with state and local educational experts all working together to support school and district change. The following resources are available to Title I Focus schools:

MISchoolData.org: Each MI Excel school receives a comprehensive picture of its performance, demographic, and perception data as a tool for beginning deep conversations about areas of strength, opportunity, and focus for future transformation efforts.

District Improvement Facilitator (DIF): Working at the school and district level, each MSU-trained facilitator supports the school and district as it conducts deep conversations about each Focus school's data wall. The facilitator also assists the school in identifying the teaching and learning priorities that are most likely to close its achievement gap(s). The identified priorities are to be posted in the Focus Diagnostics section on the AdvancED website to use in revising the school's improvement plan.

The facilitator also provides supports to help the district identify and facilitate systems changes to eliminate achievement gaps and strengthen achievement for all students. Responsive strategies are incorporated into a revised school and district improvement plan; the facilitator then guides and supports district leaders in implementing the plan.

MI Toolkit: Web-based resources, available at *mitoolkit.org*, are designed to provide district leaders with knowledge and practical how-to information as they strategically reallocate their resources to support their Focus schools. The Michigan Toolkit website features static and interactive tools and useful information from leading MSU K–12 Outreach experts, along with noted educational researchers, and national and local practitioners pertaining to achievement gap areas of special education, socioeconomic status (SES), English language learners (ELL), and ethnicity. Focus school leaders can access monthly articles on key topics related to these gap areas, and gain insights to approaches for eliminating gaps among subpopulations of students.

Superintendent's Dropout Challenge: If the Focus school is not already a participant in this initiative, it must sign on as part of MI Excel. The Challenge requires the school to identify 10-15 students in all elementary, middle, and high schools who have multiple dropout risk factors and provide research-based supports and interventions.

Developing Effective Strategies for Success

Consider the Data

The MI Excel approach to cultivating deep, sustained improvement begins by engaging school and district staff in an in-depth series of dialogues about their own local data. These "data dialogues" ensure a thorough examination of a variety of data trends and ongoing, open discussion about what they mean. Through this process, school and district teams identify local needs and recommend strategies for meeting them.

What are Data Dialaogues?

Data dialogues are structured group conversations that:

- Help educators understand, develop, and work with their data through a thoughtful, reflective process that includes district and school leadership teams and multiple data sources;
- Promote openness, build relational trust, and bring positive energy to school teams;
- Guide schools and districts toward a series of big ideas for strategic change that are essential to improved student achievement;
- Help educators understand, develop, and work with their data through a thoughtful, reflective process that includes district and school leadership teams and multiple data sources.

District-level Data Dialogues

The district improvement facilitator deployed by MSU K–12 Outreach works at the district level to help central office staff develop the capacity needed to lead the data dialogue process in their Focus school(s). In turn, the district provides the practical support to bring about change at the school level.

After the first set of data dialogues has been completed, the school and district team have a core set of building-specific teaching and learning priorities to begin using in their planning processes. These ideas are analyzed, prioritized, and used to inform clear improvement goals, objectives, and strategies that will be operationalized through detailed action and budget plans. Once the necessary plans have been completed, MI Excel supports evolve into technical assistance and implementation coaching.

Building-level Data Dialogues

The process of engaging school teams in data conversations can help surface educators' ideas and assumptions, ensuring that conclusions are firmly grounded in multiple sources of data. The dialogue process promotes openness and relational trust, and brings positive energy to school teams. The end product is a series of teaching and learning priorities that will become part of district and school planning.

Steps in the Data Dialogue Process

Looking at data and discovering what they mean can be overwhelming without a structured process. The process recommended here is based on the work of Bruce Wellman and Laura Lipton, and has three phases:

Phase 1: Activate & Engage. The data dialogue opens with the formation of a well-prepared district and school support team. Before any data is placed into consideration, school and district leaders agree upon team norms, make predictions about what the data will show, and uncover their own underlying assumptions.

Phase 2: Explore & Discover. After setting the groundwork, district and school support team members begin to review the data. This phase of dialogue involves discovery and prompts teams to remain open to possibilities, look for patterns, and observe the real stories in relation to the data. This is a time of exploration, not explanation.

Phase 3: Organize & Integrate. The third phase of the data dialogue will support the transition to causation and action. Teams work together to dig deep, uncover causal factors, and generate powerful big ideas for rapidly improving student learning and achievement.

Plan

School-level data conversations form a powerful basis for local leaders to use in developing strategies for change. District intervention facilitators work at the district level and help build the capacity of the district to conduct ongoing data conversations with their schools. Through these continuing data conversations, districts support schools as they generate theories of action, consider resources, and develop solutions to key challenges. Once the appropriate teaching and learning priorities have been identified based on each Focus school's unique needs, they are to be included in AdvancED's ASSIST portal as part of the school's improvement plan.

District-Level Planning

The district's role is to ensure the Focus school is effectively supported as it begins to execute its plans. To that end, district-level data dialogue begins a wide array of performance, perception, and other data provided by the district facilitator. The leadership team, assembled from central office staff, will utilize this data as they consider systems change and improvement plans through the lenses of eight major strategic alignments:

School Funding: District and school leaders must work together to ensure school resources are correctly matched with the identified needs of students.

Teaching: Schools and districts must work to build a professional climate that is centered on the needs of students. Professional development and team building are essential.

School Design: In some instances, the organization of the school and district may be causing barriers to performance. District leaders must challenge themselves to re-imagine alternatives that are capable of boosting results.

Instructional Support: Districts must ensure the tools available for instruction (e.g., curricula, assessments, etc.) are fully aligned with school and student needs.

Leadership: School and district leaders may need additional support to ensure their effectiveness. Professional development and capacity building are essential for lasting transformation, and should be considered.

Central Services: District systems and supports should match school and student needs. Changes may be required to streamline administration and support lasting improvement.

Partnerships: A variety of community-based, regional, or even private partnerships may be appropriate to meet student needs, particularly if school and district resources are scarce. This intensive planning time affords opportunities for exploring and establishing innovative family and community relationships.

Culture and Climate: Focus schools and districts may need some support as they re-establish a mindset of success. Fostering a healthy climate of trust, accountability, and support is a crucial part of any lasting improvement process.

Viewing data and improvement through each of these strategic lenses will guide district leaders as they develop effective goals, objectives, and action plans for change. These elements are all folded into a revised district improvement plan.

A Robust Feedback Loop

District improvement facilitators will work closely with district and school leaders 1) to keep improvement plans and activities aligned to the achievement gap data, and 2) to collect, analyze, and use new data to adjust plans as needed to support continuous improvement in student learning and ensure transformation efforts are appropriate, rapid, and lasting.

MSU K–12 Outreach facilitators have access to a dedicated team of experts equipped with knowledge and strategies for improving student achievement among frequently underserved populations (e.g., students of poverty, students of color, English learners, and special education students). Through the MSU Office of K–12 Outreach, Focus schools have access to professional development, high-quality tools and resources and local consultation, all designed to enhance local success and eliminate gaps.

How to Make the Most of MI Excel

The MI Excel improvement process is deep and transformative. Local school and district leadership teams working with MI Excel report extensive growth in all of the following areas:

- Robust understanding and use of local data
- Confident identification of change strategies
- Effective team dialogue about difficult/contentious issues
- High levels of organizational trust, leading to healthy school and district cultures

Build an Effective Team

MI Excel carefully matches, selects, and deploys district improvement facilitators to work with local district teams. As mentioned, the facilitators are experienced educators who understand the practical concerns of Focus schools and can introduce proven strategies for strengthening systems and addressing achievement gaps.

Each district improvement facilitator will work closely with central office staff assigned to carry out data conversations at the school level. In choosing these staff members, districts should make sure to emphasize the following personal and professional characteristics:

- **Resourcefulness.** Deep wells of knowledge and fortitude are needed to thoroughly explore problems and identify solutions that work.
- **Ability to listen.** Team members will learn to fully honor and understand the viewpoints of others.
- **Flexibility.** The MI Excel improvement processes have tension points built into them; team members must be capable of adapting to an unfolding process.
- **Commitment to student outcomes.** When it comes to a decision between a personal interest and student performance, the student must always win.

The professionals deployed through MI Excel can serve as valuable resources to local leaders as they select and prepare key professionals for this work.

Scale Up a Multi-Tiered System of Support

What is a multi-tiered system of support?

All learners have unique needs. A multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is an integrated system of instruction, assessment, and intervention designed to meet the achievement and behavioral needs of all students by appropriately using a variety of resources, evidence-based strategies, and tools for growth.

Focus schools in Michigan have ample opportunities to develop their capacity for reaching all learners. It is essential for schools to build a clear and consistent framework that adapts to provide just-in-time support for students based on their level of need. To support the development of a strong support system, MDE and its partners make training, literature, and other resources available:

Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners Initiative strives to reduce the risk of dropout. Teams support students during their high school experience and foster a culture of high expectations. Team members share data, observations, and ideas with each other and their staffs as they work to create positive outcomes for students by addressing school improvement practices.

The Michigan Transition Outcomes Project (MI-TOP) facilitates the development of effective systems and transition practices to ensure all students with disabilities are prepared for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. MI-TOP provides mandatory professional development to transition coordinators around the state on an ongoing basis.

Michigan Virtual University (MVU) has partnered with MDE in the creation of a coaching module on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which is housed in Michigan Learnport (*www.learnport.org*). This module is available free of charge to teachers in Focus Schools who might want to improve their implementation of a MTSS.

The Michigan Online Professional Learning System (MOPLS) is an online, interactive, user-driven program available to all Michigan educators who want high-quality professional learning options. MOPLS supports teachers as they deliver content and instruction aligned to the Common Core State Standards, and offers ways to engage students who struggle with key concepts in language arts and mathematics. Carefully reviewed resources aligned to the Common Core will help educators extend their understanding of key concepts and methodologies in both content areas. The program also features instructional examples that demonstrate alternative ways to teach the core content to students who are struggling, specifically students with disabilities.

MOPLS' *Assessment Selection Guidelines* module aids educator teams and assessment coordinators in the correct identification of students with the proper statewide assessment. This module acts as a primer for the MEAP assessment, providing users with detailed understanding of Michigan's assessments, the laws and policies that govern them, sample assessment items, and an interactive flowchart to help guide assessment decisions. Another module, the *Using and Interpreting English Language Proficiency Assessments* (ELPA) Reports program, is also available to teachers of English language learners (ELLs) who administer the ELPA. This module, supported with state funds, provides teachers with a complete overview of the assessment reports for the ELPA, starting at the most basic explanations of language domains and score calculation and progressing to a walkthrough of the Student Data File. The program also presents videos, created in cooperation with five different Michigan regional educational service agencies and districts, showing how districts and schools use scores for student placement, program evaluation, and parent communications.

MDE also provides technical assistance to all schools based on Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives of English language learners and other criteria. Technical assistance and professional development incorporate webinars, video conferencing, web dialogues, annual conferences, and individualized meetings. The annual Special Populations conference also includes sessions for technical assistance and best instructional practices.

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model Capacity-Building Professional Development Initiative was launched in 2009 with assistance from the Great Lakes East Comprehensive Center at Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of the American Institutes for Research. The purpose of the initiative is to provide sheltered instruction for trainers across the state that will improve the achievement of English learners, particularly in content-area classes. Since 2009, MDE has provided a statewide five-day professional development "train the trainer" model to a cohort of 20 educators per year in SIOP and Blueprint for Exceptional Writing (process writing). Each MDE trainer provides a four-day regional workshop in the summer to about 40–60 educators, and ongoing job-embedded professional development with model lessons, debriefing, and collegial visits.

Dig Deeper into School Improvement

MDE has partnered with Michigan Virtual University to develop a series of online modules related to school improvement. These modules provide support to school teams in effectively implementing each component of Michigan's Continuous School Improvement model (MI CSI):

- gather data
- study
- plan
- implement
- monitor
- evaluate

These modules are available free of charge to all educators through Michigan Learnport (*www.learnport.org*).

Tap into a MI-MAP Toolkit

MDE has developed a dynamic toolkit for school improvement in partnership with expert educators. MI-Map provides practical strategies and materials to shape, support, and sustain system-wide innovation and school improvement.

The MI-MAP kit contains over 300 easy-to-use practical strategies and activities within 47 topics to help support local transformation efforts. It's free and available online at the Michigan Department of Education website at, *www.michigan.gov/mde*. Click "Career and College Ready" tab on the left column, "School Improvement," and "MI-Map."

Access the Teaching for Learning Portal

MDE has created a portal (*teachingforlearning.org*) that allows educators to efficiently interact with all aspects of the state's robust Teaching for Learning Framework. This framework supports effective instruction in challenging content across all grade levels and content areas.

The framework outlines 77 research-based Essential Skills (organized into 14 Fundamental Processes and three Core Elements) that can be learned, practiced, and utilized by classroom teachers to efficiently and effectively deliver instruction. Certainly it is not the expectation that a teacher use all 77 Essential Skills in every lesson or every day, or even every week. Rather, the resources on the Portal website are meant to guide teachers in determining how to effectively match the Essential Skills to the content and learning objectives to which they are teaching in order to maximize student learning.

Although Focus schools are being challenged to reduce achievement gaps, they don't have to do it alone. MI Excel is here to help.

Communicating About Changes

Effective messaging, outreach, and documentation of project results are essential to leveraging the success of MI Excel. MDE and its partners have developed an array of necessary internal and external communication strategies and materials for Focus schools to use.

Partner/Project Communications

As your Focus school begins addressing its achievement gaps, it will be important to keep close ties and open dialogue among partners and staff. Here are some of the channels already in place to support effective dialogue:

Periodic Reporting Meetings & Dialogues: Naturally, much of the work planned for Focus schools will entail face-to-face meetings at the school and district levels. Additionally, district improvement facilitators will have ongoing dialogues with central office staff regarding their work of supporting transformation in their schools. These sessions offer rich opportunities for learning, discussion, and action.

Virtual Connections: Specific tools and resources have been created to incorporate all stakeholders and supporting organizations in professional dialogue and learning. In an effort to maintain coherence among all partners, MSU K–12 Outreach facilitators use stable platforms for communication, administration, and learning.

- **MI Toolkit.** Web-based resources, available at *mitoolkit.org,* are designed to provide district leaders with knowledge and practical how-to information as they strategically reallocate their resources to support their Focus schools. The Michigan Toolkit website features static and interactive tools and useful information from leading MSU K–12 experts, along with noted educational researchers, and national and local practitioners pertaining to achievement gap areas of special education, socioeconomic status (SES), English language learners (ELL), and ethnicity. Focus school leaders can access monthly articles on key topics related to these gap areas, and gain insights to approaches for eliminating gaps among subpopulations of students.
- **MDE Resources**. The Michigan Department of Education offers key training materials, memoranda, reports, and updates at *michigan.gov/focusschools.* Also included are Frequently Asked Questions and historical information.

Training Events and Workshops are held to address specific content areas and issues of concern.

Staff Communications

As the process of change occurs in Focus schools and districts, strong internal communications are essential. School leaders, improvement team members, and others taking part in local transformation efforts must provide regular written and verbal updates to ensure changes are well understood and embraced.

Communication with School Boards

One of the greatest challenges Focus schools and districts face is maintaining appropriate levels of communication with their school boards and communities. As public officials responsible for setting school policy and managing budgets, board members must be kept in the loop about the progress of Focus school transformation activities.

It is expected that boards will receive quarterly updates from the district pertaining to the progress of each Focus school's transformation efforts. These updates can help ensure that the board is able to articulate what is being done to rapidly improve local results.

Ongoing and effective communication to and among all key participants, from partners to parents, is critical to successful school transformation.

Community Outreach

Upon learning that their local school has been designated with Focus status, many community members, parents, students, and others will be understandably concerned. It is reasonable for the school and district to receive inquiries from the media, policymakers, and others seeking to understand the meaning of this development. In response, Focus school and district leaders will need to develop a coherent, effective strategy for communicating about this change. The following four-step process outlined by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) will help Focus school educators craft and deliver appropriate messages about what's happening in their schools:

Research: The school first compiles all relevant information and results pertaining to the Focus school. The school then considers each of the audiences with which it communicates and determines what those audiences will need and/or expect to hear. Pockets of support and opposition are also identified in an effort to proactively anticipate questions, concerns, and responses.

Action Plan: School communication objectives and strategies are identified in response to the research results. These strategies should strive to ensure all stakeholders understand what is next for the school, and support its future transformation efforts. Written materials (e.g., letters to parents, talking points, FAQs) are developed in anticipation of the public's thirst for information. A tool that may be useful in drawing data from which to craft your communication strategy is available at *www.michigan.gov/focusschools.* The "Statewide Top-to-Bottom Ranking Resources" document includes a worksheet that selects information from a school's data profile and fits it into a communication outline.

Communicate/Implement: School and district leaders make every effort to execute the action plan as written.

Evaluate: The action plan should include various check points to see how communication messages and strategies are working. If necessary, adjustments are made to keep ahead of critical issues and events.

Supplemental Reading List

Data Use

Lipton, L., & Wellman, B. M. (2012). *Got data? Now what?: Creating and leading cultures of inquiry*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Peery, A. (2011). *The data teams experience a guide to effective meetings*. Englewood, CO: Lead + Learn Press.

Wellman, B., & Lipton, L. (2004). *Data-driven dialogue: A facilitator's guide to collaborative inquiry*. Sherman, CT: Mira Via, LLC.

District-Level Change

Kaufman, T. E., & Grimm, E. D. (2012). *Collaborative school improvement: eight practices for district-school partnerships to transform teaching and learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Miles, K. H., & Frank, S. (2008). *The strategic school: making the most of people, time, and money.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Leadership Development

Ferguson, R.F., Hackman, S., Hanna, R., and Ballantine, A. (June 2010). *How high schools become exemplary: Ways that leadership raises achievement and narrows gaps by improving instruction in 15 public high schools.* Report on the 2009 Annual Conference of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University. Available for download at http://www.agi.harvard.edu.

Hess, F. M. (2013). *Cage-busting leadership.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Platt, A. D. (2000). *The skillful leader: Confronting mediocre teaching.* Acton, MA: Ready About Press.

Reiss, K. (2007). *Leadership coaching for educators: Bringing out the best in school administrators.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Reducing Achievement Gaps

Cleveland, K. P. (2011). *Teaching boys who struggle in school: Strategies that turn underachievers into successful learners.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Ferguson, R. F. (2007). *Toward excellence with equity: An emerging vision for closing the achievement gap.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind what being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Murphy, J. (2010). *The educator's handbook for understanding and closing achievement gaps.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Parrett, W., & Budge, K. M. (2011). *Turning high-poverty schools into high-performing schools.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

School Improvement/Transformation

Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). Switch: *How to change things when change is hard.* New York, NY: Broadway Books.

Mehta, J. (2012). *The futures of school reform.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Peurach, D. J. (2011). *Seeing complexity in public education: Problems, possibilities, and success for all.* Oxford, CT: Oxford University Press.

Stephens, D. B. (2010). *Improving struggling schools: A developmental approach to intervention.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Winters, L., & Herman, J. L. (2011). *The turnaround toolkit: Managing rapid, sustainable school improvement.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Teaching/Instructional Improvement

City, E. A. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Dougherty, E. (2012). *Assignments matter: Making the connections that help students meet standards.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Schmoker, M. J. (2006). *Results now how we can achieve unprecedented improvements in teaching and learning.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Schmoker, M. J. (2011). *Focus elevating the essentials to radically improve student learning.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

The MET Project (2013). *Ensuring fair and reliable measures of effective teaching culminating findings from the MET project's three-year study.* Seattle, WA: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Glossary of Terms

Title I Focus School

According to the Michigan's 2012 ESEA Waiver, a Focus school is defined as being one the 10 percent of public schools in Michigan with the largest achievement gaps. Title I Focus schools are identified Focus schools that receive targeted or school-wide Title I funds.

Top to Bottom Individual School Lookup Tool

This tool is provided by the Office of Evaluation, Strategic Research, and Accountability (OESRA) (formally the BAA). Through Z scores, this tool averages student scores in math, reading, science, social studies, and writing. The resulting ranking is used to depict the overall achievement gap in Michigan's schools. Focus schools are represented by the highest 10 percent of the measured achievement gaps, statewide.

Top 30 percent

This is defined as being the group of students at a school in a specific content area, organized by grade level, who represent the highest 30 percent of scores (MEAP for K-8, MME for H.S.). These students are often not the same for all of the school's content areas. For example, girls may be better at science than boys, and hence more girls will be in the top 30 percent. However, if boys score better in math, then more boys will be in the top 30 percent. This same process occurs for each content area and each grade level, such that the "top 30 percent" in a school represents many different students in many of its grade levels.

Bottom 30 percent

This is defined as being the group of students at a school in a specific content area, organized by grade level, who represent the lowest 30 percent of scores (MEAP for K-8, MME for H.S.). As with the top 30 percent, these students are often not the same for all of the school's content areas. This same process occurs for each content area and each grade level, such that the "bottom 30 percent" in a school represents many different students in many of its grade levels.

School Improvement Plan (SIP)

Every Michigan school must develop and annually update a plan for improving student achievement. All major stakeholders in the school have input into this plan. Focus schools address the causal factors that resulted in the achievement gap between the top 30 percent of students and the bottom 30 percent.

Data Dialogue

A primary role of the MSU K–12 Outreach district facilitator is to facilitate a deep awareness and understanding of all relevant student achievement and school improvement data available for each Focus district and its associated schools. This process is termed a "data dialogue" because it is an extended conversation that takes place about each school's data. Data dialogues follow a defined format, with three phases: 1) Activate/Engage, 2) Explore/Discover, and 3) Organize/Integrate.

School Improvement Framework

Michigan has a framework for continuous school improvement in all of its schools. The framework is research-based and identifies key factors that characterize high performing schools. The framework has five (5) main strands:

- Teaching for learning
- Leadership
- Personnel and professional development
- School and community relations
- Data and information management

The school improvement framework provides a starting point for the extensive process of improvement that is taking place in Focus schools, and can serve as a model for other schools as they undergo improvement.

District Improvement Facilitator (DIF)

District Improvement Facilitators are educators who have been highly trained and employed by the MSU Office of K-12 Outreach to work with schools that are striving to eliminate achievement gaps. They arrive prepared to assist district administrators with two tasks: 1) Preparing for and leading a building-level "data dialogue" that results in 1-2 agreed-upon major changes in teaching/learning practice needed to significantly narrow the improvement gap, and 2) helping the district identify the district-level system changes needed for Focus Schools to reduce their achievement gaps.

District Improvement Plan (DIP)

A district with one or more Focus schools must revise its District Improvement Plan to specify 1-2 major changes in its school support system and report at monitoring intervals on its implementation of these changes.

Michigan Department of Education
608 W. Allegan Street
P.O. Box 30008
Lansing, MI 48909

517–373–3324
www.michigan.gov/mde