A guided empowerment self-audit as a school improvement strategy

Charity Fleming Smith
Fetterman & Associates

Debbie Goodwin
Fetterman & Associates

ABSTRACT

No Child left Behind, The ESEA Flexibility Program, and the Race to the Top contest have spurred a multitude of School Improvement programs, businesses, initiatives and more. The current emphasis on standardized testing, data gathering and analysis, and measuring effective schooling has caused many education agencies, state and local, to seek evaluation services and to employ evaluation methods. A Guided Empowerment Self-Audit of any organization can reveal areas of concern that the organization can address to improve the effectiveness of the organization. The Guided Empowerment Self Evaluation approach is designed to help school communities monitor and evaluate their own performance while using indicators for School Improvement and School Turnaround. Anytime the people in the organization can be involved in a meaningful self-analysis and development of a plan of action, they are more apt to take ownership in the plan and carry it through to fruition. A Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Evaluation builds program capacity and fosters program improvement. It teaches people to help themselves by learning how to evaluate their own programs. Key concepts include: a critical friend, cycles of reflection and action, and a community of learners. The basic steps of empowerment evaluation include: 1) establishing a mission or unifying purpose; 2) taking stock - creating a baseline to measure growth and improvement; and 3) planning for the future - establishing goals and strategies to achieve objectives, as well as credible evidence to monitor change. The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit uses the Eleven Identified Indicators of Effective Schooling identified by an international evaluation firm. This research project was a comparison of Guided Empowerment Self-Audits performed by 8 schools to determine common areas of concern uncovered by the schools. One of the major areas of concern revealed by the Guided Empowerment Self-Audits was a disconnect between teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling and the school's student achievement data. Identifying barriers to success can aid any organization as it seeks to improve.

Keywords: Empowerment, Self-Audit, School Improvement

INTRODUCTION

Various strategies have been proposed in recent literature to turn around student achievement in schools since the implementation of the Race to the Top Initiative. Strategies to improve student achievement abound, especially in low performing schools. These schools have been analyzed by various external methods to determine the root cause of their lack of performance or mediocre performance. Educators have looked to the business world for strategies that may also be used in education. One such strategy is the empowerment evaluation. Empowerment Evaluation was conceptualized and initially introduced at the American Evaluation Association conference by David Fetterman. The seminal work on empowerment evaluation was completed in 1996 by Fetterman, Kraftarian, and Wandersman.   Empowerment evaluation, according to David Fetterman, (2007), is:

> The use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. It employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Although it can be applied to individuals, organizations, communities, and societies or cultures, the focus is usually on programs. Empowerment evaluation is a part of the intellectual landscape of evaluation. A wide range of programs use EE, including substance abuse prevention, indigent health care, welfare reform, battered women's shelters, adolescent pregnancy prevention, individuals with disabilities, doctoral programs." Further, descriptions of programs that use empowerment evaluation appear in *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment and Accountability* (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996).

In addition, this approach has been institutionalized within the American Evaluation Association and is consistent with the spirit of the standards developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Fetterman, 1995b; Joint Committee, 1994). Most recently empowerment evaluations have been used in K-12- public schools as a tool for school improvement initiatives. In 2001, the Arkansas Department of Education, Division of Accountability, selected David Fetterman to conduct Empowerment Evaluations on school districts identified in Academic Distress in order to help those schools identify areas that required immediate improvement (Fetterman & Smith 2001).

What is the Value of an Empowerment Self-Audit Evaluation?

Anytime the people in the organization can be involved in a meaningful self-analysis and development of the plan of action, they are more apt to take ownership in the plan and carry it through to fruition. When schools participate collaboratively and actively in an Empowerment Evaluation, they are more likely to make decisions and take actions based on their evaluation data. The most current definition of Empowerment Evaluation is: "An evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization." (Wandersman et al., 2005, p.28).

Prior to Empowerment Evaluations or Self Evaluations, organizations have traditionally hired an independent evaluator to conduct an evaluation of their strategies for them (Rossi,

Freeman & Lipsey, 1999). In some cases these evaluations were not used because stakeholders did not have any ownership in the report or the process. Unlike the traditional external evaluation, whose evaluators often worked hard to understand and develop an evaluation plan to address a school's concerns and improve, in the Empowerment Self-Evaluation, the school leadership with first- hand knowledge of the school and the entire staff become active participants in the evaluation process (Cox, Keener, Wandersman A 2009).

According to David Fetterman (2007), a pragmatic influence on empowerment evaluation is the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's emphasis on empowerment in community settings. The foundation has taken a clear position concerning empowerment as a funding strategy: Empowerment evaluation is largely based on Zimmerman's theory of empowerment (Fetterman, 1996). Zimmerman suggests that,

> "We've long been convinced that problems can best be solved at the local level by people who live with them on a daily basis. In other words, individuals and groups of people must be empowered to become changemakers and solve their own problems, through the organizations and institutions they devise. . . . Through our community-based programming, we are helping to empower various individuals, agencies, institutions, and organizations to work together to identify problems and to find quality, cost-effective solutions. In doing so, we find ourselves working more than ever with grantees with whom we have been less involved--smaller, newer organizations and their programs. (*Transitions,* 1992, p. 6)

A review of the literature suggests that interest in self-evaluations in schools is growing. School self-evaluation can be a fundamental force in achieving school improvement (CFBT Education Trust, 2013). The real value in Empowerment Evaluations can best be described by educators, such as Samuel White, principal of the Brinkley High School who suggested that, "finally we have reports that we can use." (May 1, 2013).

What is the Empowerment Evaluation Approach to School Improvement?

The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Evaluation approach is designed to help school communities monitor and evaluate their own performance while using local, state and USDOE indicators for School Improvement and School Turnaround Principles as benchmarks. It is used in comprehensive educational initiatives and is designed to help groups accomplish their goals. "Empowerment Evaluation" is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination" (Fetterman, 2007). The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Evaluation Approach uses Empowerment Coaches as critical friends to help schools conduct the internal self evaluation and to check initial perception against actual school achievement data.

What is the Role of the Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Team/Critical Friends or Coaches?

Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Team/Critical Friends or Coaches help the school staff conduct the self-evaluation. Coaches generally provide general guidance and direction to the effort, attending sessions to monitor and facilitate as needed. It is critical to emphasize that the staff are in charge of their effort; otherwise, program participants initially tend to look to the empowerment evaluator as expert, which makes them dependent on an outside agent. The

Empowerment Team meet with parents, teachers, students and community members as they conduct the evaluation to provide support and help the staff review current evidence. The Empowerment Evaluation Team clears away obstacles and identifies and clarifies miscommunication patterns. They participate in meetings along with internal empowerment evaluators, providing explanations, suggestions, and advice at various junctures to help ensure that the process has a fair chance and that perceptions are checked against current school achievement data.

An Empowerment Evaluation Coach can also provide useful information about how to create facilitation teams (balancing analytical and social skills), work with resistant (but interested) units, develop refresher sessions to energize tired units, and resolve various protocol issues. Simple suggestions along these lines can keep an effort from backfiring or being seriously derailed. A coach may also be asked to help create the evaluation design with minimal additional support. The Empowerment Evaluation Coach ensures that the evaluation remains in the hands of program personnel. The coach's task is to provide useful information, based on the evaluator's training and past experience, to keep the effort on course.

How is the Guided Empowerment Self Audit Used in Schools?

The Empowerment Evaluation process is designed to be used by people. It places evaluation in the hands of the school community and staff members. The more that people are engaged in conducting their own evaluations, the more likely they are to believe in them because the evaluation findings are theirs. In addition, a byproduct of this experience is that school leaders learn to think evaluatively. The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit is a process by which members of staff in a school enter cycles of reflections on their current practice, check current perceptions against established evidence and identify areas for action to stimulate improvement in the areas of school performance and improved educator capacity.

Feedback received from teachers, principals, students, and staff members are generally extremely positive; and all staff actively engage in the empowerment process. Often initial staff perceptions are changed as schools explore data to ensure that initial perceptions can be validated. Rather than an external evaluator presenting an independent report, school personnel are guided by self- exploration and inquiry. During the process, new ideas and subtle changes can be implemented immediately implemented suggestions that could impact immediate wins. Therefore, the Empowerment Evaluation report and empowering self analysis process will be used collaboratively for school improvement planning as the school continues to make progress.

According to Miller and Campbell, (2006) and Fetterman (2007), There are ten principles that are an essential means for guiding empowerment evaluations. These principles are suggested to be associated with the process of an empowerment evaluation. They include: 1. Improvement 2. Organizational Learning 3. Community Ownership 4. Inclusion 5. Democratic participation 6. Social Justice 7. Community knowledge 8. Evidence-based strategies 9. Capacity building 10. Accountability.

Schools use Empowerment Self-Audit findings to strengthen their internal teaching and learning systems and thereby facilitate the improvement of the quality of their core academic activities. Decisions about the manner in which this is done, and the priority accorded to the various recommendations are collaboratively planned with district personnel. It is important to note that program participants--including clients--conduct their own evaluations; an outside Empowerment Evaluation Coach serves as an additional facilitator depending on internal

program capabilities

METHODOLOGY OF THE GUIDED EMPOWERMENT SELF-AUDIT

The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Evaluation is conducted as a qualitative and quantitative research study encompassing the basic research steps of:

1. Posing a research question.
> The question for the study is, "What is the state of your school as perceived by the stakeholders, how does that perception compare with the data, and what should your school do from this point to improve student achievement?
2. Collecting qualitative data: Surveys, Interviews, Artifacts, & Focus Groups.
3. Triangulating the data with student achievement data to answer the research question.
4. Drawing Conclusions.
5. Creating recommendations for change.

Three critical decisions are made before the data collection begins: 1.) What criteria will be used as the framework for organizing the data? 2.) How will the data be analyzed? 3.) What evaluative measure will be used to assign levels of implementation on the established criteria?

First, a review of the blended set of school performance indicators encompassing the State, local school district and the Federal School Turnaround Principles is conducted.   Second, a decision is made to triangulate the data from document perusals, interviews, observations and perception surveys. Third, a Common Rubric is adopted with a 3 point Likert Scale representing the following categories:

1. Needs Improvement
2. Acceptable
3. Exemplary.

Identifying the Eleven Indicators of School Performance

National, State and local districts have established standards of school performance. For example in Arkansas, the Nine Arkansas Scholastic Audit Standards are used as the measuring instrument for Arkansas Schools' performance.   To be customized and inclusive, the National Seven Principles of School Turnaround are also combined to ensure a complete examination based on the dual research behind these two measures of school performance. Schools can perform a crosswalk between the local and state standards with the National standards. A sample cross-walk of the two rubrics is identified as The Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling.

The following table denotes the final Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling agreed upon as a result of combining of the ADE Scholastic Audit Standards and the Federal Seven Principles of School Turnaround.

Table 1: The Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling

ADE Scholastic Audit Indicators/ Arkansas School improvement Standards	Federal Seven Principles of School Turnaround	The Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling
Academic Performance Standard 1: Curriculum-The school develops and implements a curriculum that is rigorous, intentional, and aligned to state and local standards.	College and Career ready standards and curriculum	**Academic Performance Indicator 1: Curriculum-**The school develops and implements a curriculum that is rigorous, intentional, aligned to Common Core, and state and local standards**.**
Academic Performance Standard 2: Assessment- The school utilizes multiple evaluation and assessment strategies to continuously monitor and modify instruction to meet student needs and support proficient student work.		**Academic Performance Indicator 2:** Assessment-The school utilizes multiple evaluation and assessment strategies to continuously monitor and modify instruction to meet student needs and support proficient student work, teachers are trained in assessment literacy.
Academic Performance Standard 3: Instruction- The school's instructional program actively engages all students by using effective, varied, and research-based practices to improve student academic performance.	**Step 1 High Quality Teaching:** Ensuring that teachers are effective and able to improve instruction. Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.	**Academic Performance Indicator 3:** Instruction/High Quality Teaching-The school's instructional program actively engages all students by using effective, varied, and research-based practices to improve student academic performance, and teachers are effective and able to improve instruction.
Learning Environment Standard 4: School Culture-The school/district functions as an effective learning community and supports a climate conducive to performance excellence.	**Step V. School Environment:** Establishing a school environment that improves student achievement, and student's needs	**Learning Environment Indicator 4:** School Culture-The school/district functions as an effective learning community, improves student achievement, and supports a climate conducive to performance excellence**.**
Learning Environment Standard 5: Student, Family, and Community Support-The school/district works with families and community groups to remove barriers to learning in an effort to meet the intellectual, social, career, and developmental needs of students.	**Step IV.** School Community Engagement	**Learning Environment indicator 5: Student, Family, and Community Support-**The school/district works with families and community groups to remove barriers to learning in an effort to meet the intellectual, social, career, and developmental needs of students.

ADE Scholastic Audit Indicators/ Arkansas School improvement Standards	Federal Seven Principles of School Turnaround	The Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling
Learning Environment **Standard 6:** Professional Growth, Development, and Evaluation-The school/district provides research-based, results driven professional development opportunities for staff and implements performance evaluation procedures in order to improve teaching and learning.		**Learning Environment** **Indicator 6:** Professional Growth, Development, and Evaluation-The school/district provides research-based, results driven professional development opportunities for staff and implements performance evaluation procedures in order to improve teaching and learning.
Efficiency **Standard 7: Leadership-** School/district instructional decisions focus on support for teaching and learning, organizational direction, high efficiency performance expectations, creating a learning culture, and developing leadership capacity.	**Step II: Effective School Leadership** Providing strong leadership by a track record in improving achievement and has the ability to lead the turnaround effort	**Efficiency** **Indicator 7:** Leadership-School/district instructional decisions focus on support for teaching and learning, School Turnaround, high efficiency performance expectations, creating a learning culture, and developing leadership capacity.
Efficiency **Standard 8: Organizational Structure and Resources**-The organization of the school/district maximizes use of time, all available space and other resources to maximize teaching and learning and support high student and staff performances.		**Efficiency** **Indicator 8: Organizational Structure and Resources-**The organization of the school/district maximizes use of time, all available space and other resources to maximize teaching and learning and support high student and staff performances.
Efficiency **Standard 9: Comprehensive and Effective Planning-**The school/district develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive school improvement plan that communicates a clear		**Efficiency** **Indicator 9:** Comprehensive and Effective Planning-The school/district develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive school improvement plan that communicates a clear purpose, direction, and action plan focused on teaching and learning.

ADE Scholastic Audit Indicators/ Arkansas School improvement Standards	Federal Seven Principles of School Turnaround	The Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling
purpose, direction, and action plan focused on teaching and learning.		
Use of Data Principle	**Step IV: Collaborative use of Data:** Using data to inform instruction and for continuous improvement by providing time collaboration on the use of data	**Efficiency** **Indicator 10**: Use of Data, Assessment Using data to inform instruction and for continuous improvement by providing time collaboration on the use of data.
Extended Day Principle	**Step VII. Extended Day/ Extended Year Activities**	**Efficiency** **Indicator 11: Extended Day Principle** Extended learning is provided to enhance academic and non-academic skills.

Triangulation of Data

The Empowerment Self Audit report is based on a triangulation of data gathered from perusal of documents, observations, interviews, and completed perceptual survey results as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1:   The Triangulation of Data

The Common Rubric

In order to simplify results and create a more cohesive understanding, the following rubric is used for documenting opinions on the implementation of the Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling. The Common Rubric is explained in **Figure 2**.
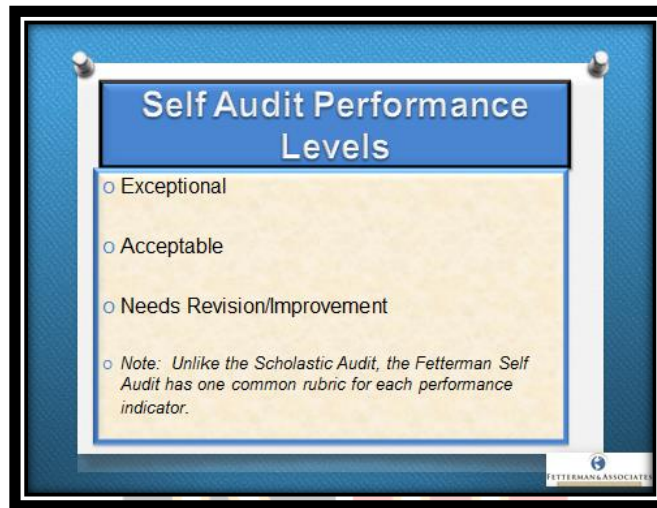
Figure 2: Self Audit Performance Levels

Table 2: Common Rubric and Benchmarks

3 = Exceptional/Exemplary	2 = Acceptable	1 = Needs Revision/Improvement
Clear evidence is presented to show the current level of implementation of the indicators assessed in this category. For each indicator assessed as fully implemented there is clear evidence that it has become an established practice in the school and is sustainable over time.	Some evidence is presented to show the current level of implementation of the indicators assessed in this category. For each indicator assessed as fully implemented there is some evidence that it has become an established practice in the school.	Little or no evidence is presented to show the current level of implementation of the indicators assessed in this category. For each indicator assessed as fully implemented there is little or no evidence that it has become an established practice in the school.
Created tasks for this category represent a concise focus for improvement and clearly demonstrate the capacity for achieving full implementation by target dates based on available resources. Strategies are clear and likely to increase	Created tasks for this category represent some focus for improvement. Demonstration of capacity for full implementation by targets dates is stated but may not be realistic based on available resources. Strategies are	Created tasks for this category are not evident or not realistic which demonstrates a perceived inability to successfully implement. Strategies have not been provided, or it is not clear how strategies will increase the

3 = Exceptional/Exemplary	2 = Acceptable	1 = Needs Revision/Improvement
the quality of instruction, using research-based methods and strategies.	mostly clear and may increase the quality of instruction, using research-based methods and strategies.	quality of instruction, using research-based methods and strategies.
It is apparent that the school leadership team has continuously worked toward completion of tasks, adding new tasks and new indicators throughout the year. Clear evidence is presented that completed indicators have become established practices in the school and are sustainable over time.	It is apparent that the school leadership team has continuously worked toward completion of tasks for the planned indicators. Clear evidence is presented that completed indicators have become established practice in the school.	There is little or no evidence that planned indicators and tasks have been continuously monitored.

DATA COLLECTION

Overview of the Data Collection Process

The Empowerment Self-Audit process is conducted in three distinct phases. First, activities are performed before the On-site Visit, such as planning, gathering the Portfolio Documents, and researching the statistical information about the school.

Second, the On-site visit is conducted over a two day visit. On Day One, the Empowerment panel coaches arrive at the school to observe the morning activities. As the instructional day begins, the panel conducts an introductory meeting with the principal and the school's leadership team.

Next Empowerment Self-Audit panel members, in conjunction with the principal, conduct a benchmarking observation for inter-rater agreement in a principal selected classroom. The Empowerment Self Audit panel members later conduct classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students and observe routines and procedures. Additionally Focus group interviews are conducted with groups of students, parents, and teachers throughout the day.

At the end the instructional day on Day One of the visit, the Empowerment Self-Audit Panel conducts a "Taking Stock" meeting with the school faculty followed by a personal cycle of reflection with the principal analyzing the "Taking Stock" activity results and the critical role it plays in the School Improvement process. While the principal and A Guided Empowerment Self-Audit panel conducts the reflection over the Taking Stock results, the faculty proceeds to complete on-line perception surveys on Classroom Expectations and Teacher Perceptions.

On the second day of the On-Site Visit, the panel again arrives and begins observations of the "routines and procedures" in the building. The principal and the Guided Empowerment Self Audit Panel conduct a second benchmarking observation for inter-rater agreement, in another principal selected classroom. Similar to Day One activities, the audit panel continues with evidence gathering in the form of classroom observations, interviews, and hallway and procedure

observations.

Also on Day Two, parents and students complete on-line perception surveys linked to the indicators on the Scholastic Audit and the Seven Principles of Turnaround. Day Two ends with an exit interview with the principal. After the on-site visit, The Empowerment Self Audit Panel organizes, triangulates, and analyzes the collected data that leads to the finished report.
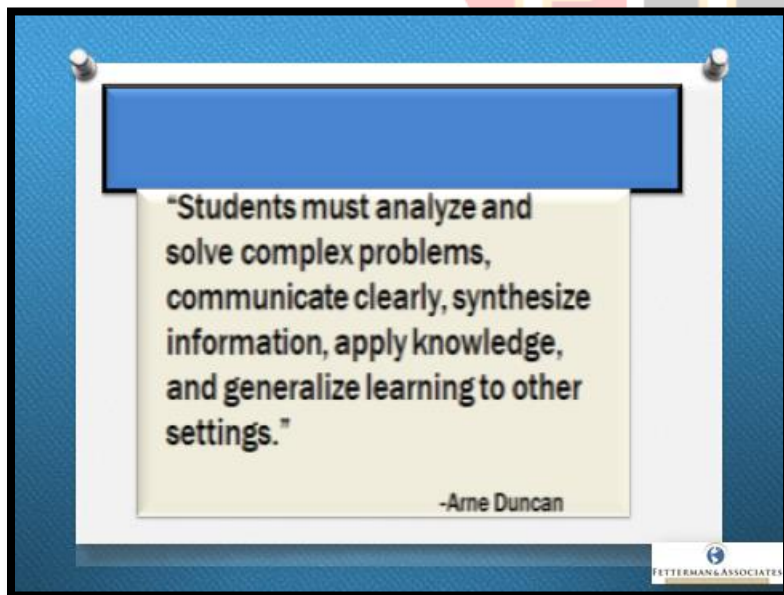
Detailed Explanation of the Self-Audit Activities

Prior to the on-site visit, the principal and faculty collect appropriate artifacts for the Audit Portfolio which included evidence such as Annual School Performance documentation, previous Scholastic Audits, School Profile, curriculum maps, pacing guides, PLC Meeting Minutes, parent meetings, Extended Day Organization, and schedules.

DURING THE ON-SITE VISIT: DAY ONE

During the audit visit, the Audit Panel conducts the activities in a professional manner. To set the tone for the on-site visit, A Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Panel begins the On-site visit by sharing an adopted definition of excellence. Namely, "Excellence is the result of caring more than others think is wise, risking more than others think is safe, dreaming more than others think is practical, and expecting more than others think is possible." ~ Mac Anderson

During the visit, the panel conducts awareness sessions with the principal, assistant principal, and leadership team members. The awareness sessions that include introductions, an overview of the audit process, and establishment of an open door policy. Teachers are asked to think evaluatively about the high expectations for student performance by Arne Duncan.

Figure 3

"Students must analyze and solve complex problems, communicate clearly, synthesize information, apply knowledge, and generalize learning to other settings."

-Arne Duncan

Step 1: Introductory Meeting with the Principal

The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit panel conducts an introductory meeting with the principal, in order to establish common expectations for the two-day visit. During this time, the advantages and the overview of activities of the Guided Empowerment Self-Audit are discussed with the principal. The principal provides the panel with the Portfolio: school profile, school maps, and names of staff members. The team notifies the principal how each staff member will be able to participate in the Guided Empowerment Self-Audit process during the empowerment session at the end of the school day.

Figure 4: Empowerment Self Audit Advantages

Step 2: Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Awareness Sessions with School Leadership Team

During the opening awareness session the Empowerment Self-Audit Panel presents the Self-Audit process in detail with information pertinent to the topics listed below:

1. Overview of the self-audit
2. The data triangulation process used through the self-audit (**Figure 1**)
3. Essential questions
4. Interview protocol
5. Requested school artifacts
6. Self-audit advantages
7. Standards and indicators for school improvement (Scholastic Audit)
8. Seven Principles of School Turnaround
9. Common rubric used to measure performance (**Figure 2**)
10. Methodology
11. Data collection process and data sources
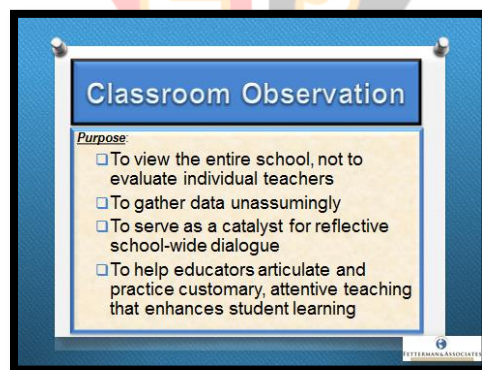12. Classroom observations

13. Items observed during observation including teacher focus, direct instruction, education monitoring, procedures, and academic modeling
14. Bloom's Taxonomy
15. Instruction strategies
16. Assessment
17. Learner Engagement
18. Learning Environment
19. Checklists
20. Perception surveys
21. Triangulation of finding
22. Summary

Members of the leadership team at the school are provided the opportunity to ask questions, provide additional documentation, and are given appropriate feedback during cycles of reflection.

Step 3: Classroom Benchmarking for Inter-rater Agreement

To ensure inter-rater agreement, the panel members and the principal have a common understanding and expectations for classroom observation data collection, a benchmarking process is conducted so that the principal can participate and better understand how classrooms will be rated and monitored. The benchmarking process helps to establish the degree of agreement among raters. According to Gwet, K. L. (2010) "Handbook of Inter-Rater Reliability (2nd Edition) the process "gives a score of how much homogeneity, or consensus, there is in the ratings given by judges. It is useful in refining the tools given to human judges, for example by determining if a particular scale is appropriate for measuring a particular variable.

Figure 5: Classroom Observations

The following steps are employed in the benchmarking process:

1. All team members monitor the classroom during the session against an established standard.
2. A rating is given to the classroom observed.
3. The Raters share and compare their assigned ratings through observation and feedback with each member of the team.
4. An agreement on the rating is established.

5. Rating expectations for the rest of the classes are discussed with the principal.

Step 4: The On-Site Work of the Audit Panel

The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Panel is split into three groups with assignment for: (1) classroom observations, (2) interviews, and (3) documentation reviews.   The panel members rotate responsibility for these roles throughout the visit.

An "Open Door Policy" is established and available for any staff or student member of the school as well as any members of the community to meet the Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Panel and make a submission. Interviews are completed and verbal feedback is given to the Principal while keeping the names of the interviewees confidential. The Panel interviews stakeholders from the 9 different groups listed below.

1. Parent Focus Groups
2. Individual Parents
3. Leadership Team Members and Principal
4. Administrative Staff Members
5. Support Staff
6. Student Focus Groups
7. Individual Students
8. Civic and Community Representatives, (when available)
9. Teachers

Step 5: On-going Critical Coaching/Cycles of Reflections

The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Panel provides evidence-based feedback, recommendations and suggestions throughout the day to the principal and leadership team members using a technique described in the literature as cycles of reflections – (compare theory of what an organization wants to happen with reality). During this process the school becomes united as a community of learners with the school staff and the Audit Panel servings as critical friends and coaches**.**

Step 6: Taking Stock: Modified Empowerment Evaluation Session

Empowerment Evaluation helps people align what they say they are doing with what they are really doing, by providing them with a continuous feedback loop designed to refine and improve their practice. Empowerment Evaluation is guided by many concepts including: 1) building a culture of evidence to make decisions; 2) using cycles of reflection—helping people think about their data, act on it, and then reflect on the impact of those decisions; 3) building a community of learners—where everyone is learning from each other along the way; and 4) cultivating reflective practitioners—people who think about how they can improve their performance on a daily basis. Guided Empowerment Self-Evaluation is also guided by a critical friend or coach who values the effort, but also asks hard questions to keep things rigorous and on track.

During the Empowerment Self-Audit faculty meeting, an overview of the Guided Empowerment Self-Audit process is provided and staff members participate in a three-step approach to empowerment evaluation including: 1) reviewing the mission; 2) taking stock; and 3) planning for the future. During this process, the participants determine whether the staff are able to successfully articulate the school mission and vision. Additionally, time is allotted to assess how well the staff perceives they are doing in relation to the Nine Indicators on the Scholastic Audit and the Seven Principles of School Turnaround.

This honest critique sets the stage for the faculty to plan for the future or establish new goals to accomplish their objectives in areas where the ratings are less than acceptable and make mid-course corrections to the existing School Improvement Plan.   The staff specifically participates in the following:

- A discussion of the mission of the school and how decisions are made based on the mission.
- An open self- audit rating of the school on the nine indicators of school improvement outlined by the ADE by placing one of five dots on the any of the nine indicators that they judged to be most effective.
- An open self-audit of themselves on the seven principles of School Turnaround rating by giving a rating from one to five. Five was the highest score and one was the lowest score.
- The individual electronic completion of the classroom expectation and teacher perception surveys.
- A discussion of the results with a focus of planning for the future or making mid-course corrections.
- Through the use of cycles of reflections, the results were presented to the principal for use in school improvement planning and outcomes including the unexpected revelations.

Empowerment Evaluation "Taking Stock" Activity Results

For the Taking Stock Activity, each participant is asked to note which School Improvement Standards the school is demonstrating the most outstanding achievement on. Although there are 9 standards; each participant is asked to vote for the 5 standards he/she thinks are being addressed most outstandingly in the school. An example of the results from one school's Taking Stock Activity is included in the table below.

Table 3: Taking Stock

School Improvement Standards Scholastic Audit	Number of Participants voting for this Standard	Percentage of the Participants voting for this standard.
Standard 1: Curriculum	24	**86%**
Standard 2: Assessment	4	**14%**
Standard 3: Instruction	27	**96%**
Standard 4: School Culture	24	**86%**
Standard 5: Community/Family Support	21	**75%**

Standard 6: Professional Development	4	**14%**
Standard 7 : Leadership	21	**75%**
Standard 8: Organization	12	**43%**
Standard 9:Comprehensive Planning	3	**11%**

Note that instruction received the highest self-rating by the faculty in all eight schools. It is obvious the faculty in this school perceives a need for change in assessment and professional development activities. This information can be used to guide the school improvement process as it moves forward.

An example of the results from another portion of the Taking Stock Activity is included in the table below. In this activity, the faculty are asked to rate their school on each of the Seven Turnaround Principles using a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest.

Table 4: Seven Turnaround Principles Activity

Seven Turnaround Principles	5	4	3	2	1	Mean
Principle 1: **Quality Teaching**	18	5	-	1	-	4.63
Principle 2: **Leadership**	15	8	2	1	-	4.48
Principle 3: **Data Usage**	-	2	14	7	-	2.62
Principle 4:**Environment**	22	3	-	-	1	4.73
Principle 5: **Instruction**	17	6	1	1	-	4.56
Principle 6:**Community Engagement**	6	12	5	1	1	3.79
Principle 7:**Extended Day/Year**	-	1	4	12	3	2.16

Step 7: Perception Surveys

On-line surveys are used to gather principal, teacher, student, and parent perceptions that are useful to schools in developing their school improvement plans for accreditation and standards implementation. The surveys also provide information about parent involvement and parent and student satisfaction with their schools. The surveys used in the Guided Empowerment Self- Audit measure participants' views of the extent the school is performing in specific areas. To develop the survey, questions were selected which address the Scholastic Audit Indicators, the Principles of School Turnaround and research- based academic expectations for schooling. The items are all Likert scaled and modified to focus specifically on how the school is doing as a learning institution. Note: all stakeholders are asked to complete perceptional data surveys on-line: Principals, teachers, students, parents, and The Panel members.

The surveys and the persons completing each one are enumerated in the list below.

1. The Classroom Instruction expectations Survey: Teachers complete this survey; the questions address teachers' perceptions of administration's expectations for teachers.
2. The Teacher Survey: teachers complete this survey. It was based on the indicators of the Scholastic Audit Indicators.
3. The Parent Survey: parents complete this survey. The questions address areas in the Scholastic Audit and School Turnaround Principles that address parent engagement and school to parent communication.
4. The Student Survey: all students complete this survey. It addresses students' perceptions of instruction practices and school climate indicators from both the Scholastic Audit Indicators and the School Turnaround principles.

Step 8: Principal Meeting/ Cycles of Reflections

Meetings are conducted with principals, both formal and informal, to review the activities of the day and to make interim recommendations based on observed activities. Recommendations for immediate wins are verbally provided to the principal.   Additionally, the results of the staff empowerment process are discussed and standards that received the lowest ratings are explored to determine reasons for the low ratings given by staff members**.**

Step 9: Parent interview and Focus Group

A focus group meeting is held with parents and the essential question of, "How is the school doing as a learning institution?" are discused.

Step 10: Teacher Interviews and Focus Group

Throughout the day interviews are conducted relative to collecting evidence to determine the answer to the essential question, "How is the school doing as a learning institution?"

DURING THE ON-SITE VISIT: DAY TWO

Step 1: Benchmarking

A second benchmarking procedure is completed. The process is the same as explained in "During the visit: Day One."

Step 2: Observations of Classrooms

Classroom observations are continued with activities being noted such as the presence of classroom rules and procedures, learning objectives, student engagement, the level of Bloom's students are engaged on, and more.

Step 3: Observation of School Culture

Elements of the school culture observed include the following:

1. Human Interactions
2. Displays
3. Celebration Artifacts
4. Established routines, celebrations, and extended day meetings with parents and students

Step 4: Observation of Procedures

The following school procedures are observed:
1. Before School Activities
2. Transitions
3. Lunch
4. Recess.
5. After School Activities

Step 5: Photo Sessions

For the purpose of the Guided Empowerment Self-Audit photos are taken in order to capture the spirit of the institution. The pictures are based in large part on the data collected, the classrooms observed, and the behavior of the students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Step 6: Formal Principal Interview

Principal interview questions are designed to collect information and explore leadership qualities such as creating and sustaining a vision and mission, the capacity to build effective relationships, operational management skills, and job knowledge relative to improving student performance.

Step 7: Planning for the Future

After the initial staff perceptions are gathered. Cycles of reflections are conducted to ensure an objective assessment based on evidence or artifacts. All available performance data is reviewed to ensure that the results accurately describe the school's level of performance. The school's leadership team, staff and the Empowerment Self-Audit Panel Coaches, facilitates the nature and scope of this process. This process according to the staffs in all eight schools helps builds organizational and individual evaluation capacity and helps to create a sense of urgency that the schools must improve. Once the evaluation of data is finalized the necessary next step is to take action.   Once strengths and weaknesses are identified, the Evaluation report is completed and all parties are kept informed. Priority improvement activities are initiated to inform action to improve student achievement and professional development with the active participation of the internal staff that participated in the evaluation.

 Evidence of the Benefits of the Empowerment Self-Audit

This research report presents an amalgamation of the findings from Guided Empowerment Self-Audits conducted in 8 schools in 2013-2014. This research project was a

comparison of Empowerment Self-Audits performed by 8 schools to determine common areas of concern uncovered by the schools. One of the major areas of concern revealed by the Guided Empowerment Self-Audits was a disconnect between teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling and the school's student achievement data. Identifying barriers to success can aid any organization as it seeks to improve.

All eight schools' perceptions of their schools' performance in the following areas demonstrated a miss-match between the schools' initial perceptions and the evidence in the following areas:

1. Standard 1: Curriculum,
2. Standard 3: Instruction, and
3. Standard 9: Comprehensive Planning.

Provided in the table below is a general description of the miss-match between the stakeholders' perceptions and the reality of analyzed data in the areas of curriculum, instruction and comprehensive planning in the 8 schools which participated in the Guided Empowerment Self-Audits.

Table 5: Documentation of Misconceptions – Curriculum

Indicator	Educator's Perception	Actual data	Capacity
Academic Performance Standard 1 Curriculum-The school develops and implements a curriculum that is rigorous, intentional, and aligned to state and local standards.	Generally, most schools rated themselves exceptional in this area even in some cases when there was no evidence of a Rigorous, Aligned Curriculum.	Curriculum documents in all eight schools were under development. Unpacking the curriculum had not occurred and alignment to state framework and Common Core State Standards were marginal.	Schools identified the need to develop a curriculum that is rigorous, intentional, and aligned to state and local standards.

Table 6: Documentation of Misconceptions- Instruction

Indicator	Educator's Perception	Actual Data	Capacity
Academic Performance Standard 3: Instruction- The school's instructional program actively engages all students by using effective, varied, and research-based practices to improve student	Generally, most schools rated themselves exceptional in this area even in some cases when there was no evidence in student performance or classroom observations that supported the	All 8 schools participated in the audit process in part because they were identified as being in need of school improvement based on low student	Schools identified the need to improve performance by using researched – based

academic performance	perception	academic achievement. Interviews with teachers also revealed a general lack of understanding of effective, research-based teaching strategies.	strategies proven to increase student performance.

Table 7: Documentation of Misconceptions- Comprehensive Planning

Indicator	Educator's Perception	Actual Data	Capacity
Standard 9: Comprehensive and Effective Planning-The school/district develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive school improvement plan that communicates a clear purpose, direction, and action plan focused on teaching and learning.	Generally, most schools rated themselves exceptional in this area even in some cases when there was little or no evidence of comprehensive planning.	Comprehensive plans showed little or no evidence of active participation of stakeholders, or a a clear purpose, direction, and action plan focused on teaching and learning.	Schools identified the need to improve performance by developing comprehensive, inclusive plans that communicate a clear purpose, direction, and action plan focused on teaching and learning.

The table below indicates the change in ratings on the Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling from the first Taking Stock Activity to a subsequent analysis comparing the perceptions of the stakeholders with the student data and observations.

Table 8: Changes in Perceptions after evidence –based inquiry and school documentation review.

School Improvement Standards Scholastic Audit rating	Number of schools rating with a Superior in this area	Number of schools with data to validate perceptions	Change in rating after internal review in agreement with internal documentation
Standard 1: Curriculum	8	2	8
Standard 2: Assessment	4	4	4
Standard 3: Instruction	8	4	4
Standard 4: School Culture	8	4	6
Standard 5: Community/Family Support	4	4	4
Standard 6: Professional Development	4	4	4
Standard 7 : Leadership	6	6	6
Standard 8: Organization	4	4	4
Standard 9:Comprehensive Planning	6	2	8
Standard 10: Data Use	8	3	8
Standard 11: Extended Day	4	4	4

CONCLUSIONS

The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit Process is an effective tool for schools to use to foster the school improvement process. When the people who do the work are active in creating the plan for improvement they are more likely to carry out the plan. This research project indicated that the process is effective since the schools changed their own ratings on the Eleven Indicators of Effective Schooling after they were guided through the process of matching data with perception. The Guided Empowerment Self-Audit process affords the school a common theoretical framework, process for evaluation, and a common language to guide the process of planning for school improvement.

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