WHAT THIS TOOL WILL HELP YOU DO. This tool is designed to provide additional guidance to principals and principal supervisors as they work together to develop problems of student learning and contributing problems of teaching and principal practice. This tool ensures that the teaching and leading problems of practice are grounded in a clear analysis of what is working and not working for students. The tool also helps the principal and principal supervisor use the analysis to generate a theory of action, or an evidence-based story, that explains the specific changes they intend to make to improve teaching and learning.

This tool will help to:

1. Develop a well-elaborated conception of the problem or situation for students, teachers, and leaders that motivates their actions in the first place.

A good theory of action does not simply elaborate which actions to take. Too often leaders jump immediately to actions without fully examining or otherwise appreciating what is happening for students and adults. As a result, sometimes there is an investment of considerable time, funding, and other resources in particular activities before we realize that what we have set out to do won’t actually get us where we want to go. If we had only suspended action and carefully examined what is happening in our settings, we might not have embarked on the wrong course.

2. Make your leadership the core of the theory of action.

This tool prompts the principal and principal supervisor to consider not merely problems in general but problems of practice — problems in what people throughout the system do day-to-day and how they think about their work — that contribute to results for students.

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3. Create an evidence-based rationale for all parts of the theory.

There’s no shortage of problems and improvement strategies in schools. But which problems are most pressing? Which problems are actually problems? Which strategies might actually work to address a particular problem? A theory-of-action approach to change views exploring these questions as fundamental to charting a promising course for improvement. And exploring these questions requires relentless articulation of your rationale for your claims about problems and “solutions” and the continuous scrutiny of evidence to support your claims.

4. Identify the supports needed to make the identified changes in principal practice.

For example, if it is determined that the principal needs to provide high-quality feedback to teachers during classroom observations, what kinds of supports might the principal need to engage in those activities? If it is determined that teachers need to differentiate instruction effectively, what other conditions besides principal feedback matter to teachers taking those actions? If you claim that teachers differentiating instruction will impact student achievement in reading, consider what other conditions affect student achievement beyond what teachers do and identify those. The tool will walk you through these questions.

Theories of action take time and never reach a final state. Rather, they are living documents that need to be revisited and refined as principals and principal supervisors take action, collect evidence, and consider changing conditions.

The tool offers principal supervisors a framework for gauging principals’ instructional leadership capacities combined with an instrument for gathering evidence of individual strengths and weaknesses over multiple contacts. Such knowledge is the necessary foundation for continuing work with each principal differentiated for that principal’s needs. Critical examination of evidence about principals’ leadership, conducted as work, also helps model the use of evidence about teaching and learning for their principals and others throughout the system.
Theory of Action 1: A First Pass

To begin, spend some time studying the theory of action graphic on the next page. To help you keep the big picture in mind as you begin the process, the image shows the connections that exist between the key players in the district: principal supervisors, principals, teachers and students.

Since the ultimate concern is improving student learning, you’ll note that the graphic encourages the principal and principal supervisor to begin deriving their theory of action not by jumping directly to perceived problems with teaching or leadership, but by focusing first on specific problems of student learning. It works backward from there, analyzing how current practice, from teaching back through principal leadership, is part of a chain of causality that produces the results in student performance that you see. This process yields a simple way to state a theory of action to undergird your work: “If the principal does X, then teachers will be able to do Y, which will help all students to learn at higher levels.”
Now, to get started with a first rough draft theory of action, work through the table below, starting at the right and working down through each column before moving to the left. Then use your answers to rough out a basic theory of action at the bottom of the table. Your initial theory can be simple and impressionistic, just to give you a feel for the logic and the bare bones of your story. After you complete this beginning exercise, it’s important to continue on to the more detailed questions on the following pages, which will help you drill down into the causality and conditions for success in each part of the system in much more depth, giving your theory more power and accuracy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>Principals</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3a. How is principal’s practice affecting teachers’ instruction? What is the principal doing (or not doing) as an instructional leader that’s helping or hindering teachers’ instructional performance?</td>
<td>2a. How is teachers’ instruction affecting student learning? What are teachers doing (or not doing) in their instruction that’s helping or hindering students’ performance?</td>
<td>1a. What’s going on with our students’ learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impressions and observations:</td>
<td>Impressions and observations:</td>
<td>Impressions and observations:</td>
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<tr>
<td>3b. What needs to change in principal practice to better support teachers’ instructional performance?</td>
<td>2b. What needs to change in teacher practice to better support student learning?</td>
<td>1b. What needs to change in our students’ learning?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>If the principal ...</td>
<td>then teachers will be able to ......</td>
<td>so that students will be able to .......</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theory of Action 2: Taking It Deeper

While your first broad-brush theory gives you a good starting point for discussion, it will not yet be detailed enough or sufficiently grounded in the evidence to give you a solid basis for effective action. To take your thinking to the next (deeper) level, take some time to look at the expanded theory of action graphic on the next page. This version includes more probing questions about your evidence for your claims about what’s going on in leadership, teaching, and learning in your school, why you are prioritizing particular issues as problems, and what you think will help to remedy those problems and why. After looking over the graphic, continue to the prompts on student learning, teaching practice and principal leadership that appear on the following pages.

Note that working your way through all of these questions will be, and should be, a much longer process than your first-take theory of action discussion. As you make your way through the process, there may be identified areas where you need to collect more evidence (looking at student data, conducting classroom walkthroughs, or having conversations with key school-based personnel) or to consult the research on effective practice before your theory can be solidified. You don’t need to hold back from sketching out your theory until you fill in all such gaps (you will be revisiting it frequently in any case). But do note areas where you need more information.