



PRINCIPAL'S
PROJECT





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Sometimes the real issue is “buried” under others.
Getting down to it takes time.

—Lana Farnsworth, Principal
William Southern Elementary School

Getting Started:

INQUIRY-BASED DECISION MAKING

You picked up the Appointment Book because you have a problem to solve or a question to answer. The purpose of the Appointment Book is to guide you through an inquiry-based process of decision making and to help you maintain the momentum necessary to address your PQ—priority question. Priority questions are the hot-button items, front burner issues, or important instructional questions that confront your school. The resolution of priority questions may occur quickly, or may take much longer, depending upon the complexity of the issue.

We recommend that you keep the Appointment Book on your desk just as you do your calendar or planner. Our experience is that if you don't see the prompts you won't use the tool.

The Appointment Book is based upon two core concepts that have their roots in the literature of reflective practice and data based decision making.





Don't let life discourage you; everyone who got where he is had to begin where he was.

—Richard L. Evans



Core Concept 1:

TIME IS ESSENTIAL
IN THE PROCESS OF INQUIRY

The first core concept of the Appointment Book is that you need to create the time to reflect upon your PQs in order to understand them and make reasoned decisions about how to proceed. Educational research indicates that administrators work more effectively when they get perspective on the issues confronting them. To do this requires that we step back, take time to think about what's going on, and design a reasoned plan of action. Killion and Todnem (1991) refer to these perspectives as "reflection in action," "reflection for action," and "reflection on action." We have used the input of practicing principals to generate workable strategies for finding and using time to your best advantage.



Develop the curiosity to experiment . . . to test and try new ways of living and thinking.

—Anonymous



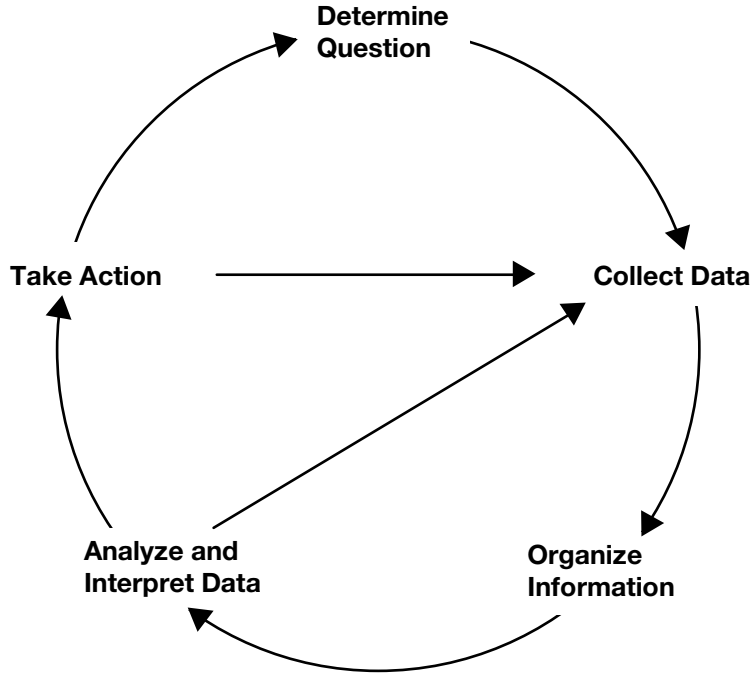
Core Concept 2: MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS

The second core concept in the Appointment Book is that all decisions about priority questions should be informed by the best available information. In the Appointment Book we share with you a process for thinking about and making informed decisions. This process is designed to be used by administrators with little or no time and with few resources. The educational research literature offers us the steps and the evidence to suggest that data-informed decisions are more likely to produce positive results for organizations and individuals than those made without benefit of measurable information. In addition, we also know that when data-informed decisions involve the input and perspective of those who are most affected by the decisions, the implementation activities tend to be more useful and the results more durable. The process of inquiry is a cyclical one that typically incorporates five steps. The figure on the following page depicts the process of inquiry as used in the Appointment Book.

This process represents an adaptation of work by Calhoun (1994), Sagar (1992), and others who have written about action research.



STEPS IN THE INQUIRY CYCLE



Our Approach

MAKING AND KEEPING APPOINTMENTS WITH YOURSELF

Quite simply, we have designed this guide as an Appointment Book because, in our experience, that is the best metaphor for helping busy administrators change old habits and adopt inquiry based decision making as a school improvement strategy. The process, principles, and forms included in this Appointment Book help structure both your thinking and your actions. It is our hope that your professional practice, as well as the students and staff with whom you work, will benefit from your adoption of this approach.

To begin the process of reflective decision-making we advocate making an appointment with yourself. Schedule an appointment of one hour with yourself right now to get clear about what the issue really is that you want to address. Write the appointment on your calendar in ink. We recommend ink because you are less likely to change this appointment if you cannot erase it.

1. **Here's an example of a PQ.** We will refer to this question throughout

Frequently we have all the answers without asking the questions.

—**Debby Fink, Principal**
Hartwood Elementary School

Appointment #1:

DETERMINE THE QUESTION

1. **Is it still a priority question?** Take a look at the PQ you wrote down. Is it still a compelling issue or does it need further clarification? This hour long appointment is the time you will give yourself to bring clarity to the question you wish to address.
2. **Clarify the question.** There are several strategies our principal colleagues have used to clarify their priority questions (PQs):
 - If someone else picked up your PQ would they be able to understand what it is you want to change?
 - Hand it to one of your teachers or to your secretary. Is it clear to them?
 - How big a priority is the issue addressed by the PQ and for whom? Is this only an issue that concerns you, or is it shared by others in your building?
 - What is driving this question as a priority? (budget, politics, consumer pressure, teachers, unions, kids, etc.)



5. **Find and Create Time.** When no time seems like a good time, what's the best of the worst?

- Find or create time to meet with yourself. Sometimes it is not entirely obvious where to find the time to step out of the chaos of your daily work. To be successful, you often need to create time where none exists.
- If your PQ is critical to the success of the school then it deserves your time. Some strategies that our principal colleagues have found useful include:
 - taking the phone off the hook, turning off your beeper, and/or turning off your cell phone for one hour.
 - finding an empty room;
 - sitting in your car;
 - paying a student to stand guard;
 - putting a sign on your door that says "Gone thinking"
- Create time to make your priority question known. Once you have written and clarified your PQ, publish it: Put it on a poster, add it to a weekly staff newsletter, share it with others. It is important to engender both understanding and support for the issue. Helping others see how you frame it, how you see it affecting the building, will be critical to getting to a workable solution.

6. **Schedule another appointment with yourself for next week.** The purpose of this next appointment will be to look at what information you have and what you will need to gather to address your PQ.

7. **Schedule your next appointment now!**





One of the hardest things about being a principal is deciding which decisions are the biggest.

—Alison Boggs
Principal, Adams City Middle School

Appointment #2:

WHAT DO I KNOW ABOUT THE ISSUE?

The purpose of this appointment is to gather and organize information to inform your thinking and decisions. The better your information, the more likely you are to make defensible decisions.

1. **Write down everything you think you know about this issue.** Include observations, ideas, and things you think you know about the PQ. Remember the sample issue we are using is “parent-teacher communication.”

FROM OUR SAMPLE:



HOW MANY SAMPLES OF
PARENT-TEACHER
COMMUNICATION CAN YOU LAY
YOUR HANDS ON?

WHAT LANDMINES HAVE YOU
STEPPED ON IN THE PAST 6
MONTHS RELATED TO THIS
ISSUE?



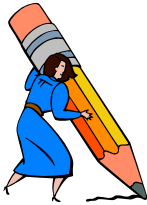
OUR SAMPLE (continued):



HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ONE
CRANKY PARENT OR IS THE
ISSUE REPRESENTATIVE OF A
LARGER GROUP?

HAS YOUR SOURCE OF
INFORMATION BEEN ONE VOCAL
TEACHER OR IS IT A BUILDING-
WIDE ISSUE?

2. Write down everything you think you know about your PQ.



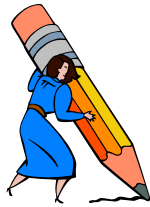
Lined writing area for notes.



3. **Sort fact from fiction.** What do you think exists vs. what is actually occurring?
 - Label information that is “hard” data
 - Label information that is your perception or that of others
 - Rate how believable or trustworthy the information is that you have at hand

4. **Identify missing information.** What do you still need to know that isn't part of the data you already gathered. List some sources of information you want/need to explore further.

5. **Write down your missing information.**



6. **Gather needed information on your PQ.** If your hour isn't up yet, go find that information now. If your hour is up, then schedule your next appointment with yourself for next week to finish data gathering.
 - If you have the resources, you might consider assigning this information gathering activity to someone else. But, be certain that they have the information ready for your next appointment.

7. **Schedule your next appointment now!**





It takes a lot more creativity to find out what's right than what's wrong.

—Anonymous

Appointment #3:

MAKE SENSE OF THE INFORMATION YOU GATHER


1. **Involve others, as needed, in this appointment.** Look to teachers who share an interest/ investment in the issue, partners at a local university, special project staff, or your support staff to help you organize and interpret information. As needed, these individuals can also help you fill in gaps in information and understanding the issue. Depending upon the issue and the availability of information, you may find that several shorter appointments will be easier to schedule than one long session.
2. **Review and understand your data.** At this point in time you should have a number of different types data in front of you. You (whether singular or plural) will now need to work with this data to understand what it is telling you about the question you have asked.





3. **Here's data gathered about our sample PQ.**

OUR SAMPLE



ALL GRADES BUT THIRD GRADE
SEND OUT A WEEKLY PARENT
UPDATE

YOUR BUILDING NEWSLETTER IS
GETTING HOME TO TWO THIRDS
OF THE PARENTS

55% OF THE PARENTS ATTEND
PARENT-TEACHER
CONFERENCES

THE NEW VOICE MAIL SYSTEM
APPEARS TO MAKE IT EASIER
FOR PARENTS TO COMMUNICATE
WITH THE SCHOOL

YOU'VE JUST PUBLISHED THE
EMAIL ADDRESS FOR EACH
STAFF MEMBER

4. **Share findings, plans, and/or thinking with others.** From this analysis of the data identify an area or several related areas which will be addressed with a specific plan. If you are working on your own, it is important to share your question, the data and your conclusions with anyone who might be impacted by your plans.

Some ways that principals have shared information with others include:

- staff or team meetings
- newsletters



Having the plan for action isn't the problem . . . the problem comes in making the action happen the way it was planned.

—Debbie Eklund, Principal
Luff Elementary School

Appointment #4:

WRITE A PLAN FOR ACTION

It is highly likely that you will be involving others at this point, so scheduling appointments becomes a bit trickier.



1. **Get those affected by your decisions involved in the process of inquiry and plan development.** Try meeting for coffee in the morning or over lunch or using staff meeting time for this activity to help accommodate the needs and time schedules of a larger group. Be creative and sensitive to the needs of the group, but don't let schedules slow your momentum! If only some of your group can make an appointment, share the results of that meeting via email or through written minutes with those who could not attend. Set a timeframe by which you want feedback. Those who want to contribute will find the time.

2. **Write a plan based on your data and the insights of your partners.** Once everyone is familiar with the PQ and what the data say about the question, it is time to begin planning how you will address the issue(s) raised in the PQ. The plan you develop should be specific, based on the data and designed to address the initial question. Be careful not to lose your focus or identify too many areas to address.
 - Your plan should identify
 - the time available to address the issue;
 - the best strategies to use given the time available;






- how to address the issue in the face of the many intervening events that can get in the way; and
- what resources (if any) are needed to implement the plan(s).

3. **Returning to our sample, the decision might be to:**

OUR SAMPLE



SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT
COMMUNICATION TOOLS BROADLY
WITH THE SCHOOL FACULTY

WORK DIRECTLY WITH 3RD GRADE
ON PREPARING AND SENDING
HOME A WEEKLY CLASS
UPDATE

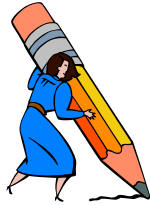
MAIL THE NEWSLETTER RATHER
THAN SEND IT HOME WITH THE
KIDS

SURVEY PARENTS TO FIND OUT
WHY ATTENDANCE IS LOWER
THAN ANTICIPATED FOR
CONFERENCES AND WHAT CAN
BE DONE TO IMPROVE THAT
ATTENDANCE.

4. **Set specific dates/times when these plans are to be carried out and identify the person or persons responsible for doing so.** Scheduling a progress meeting is important. It will keep everyone on target and give you time to celebrate successes and accomplishments. This will also help in maintaining the momentum of your work.



5. **Maintain momentum by celebrating progress.** Our colleagues have found the following to be simple, but effective, strategies for celebrating and sustaining the course of change:
 - Donuts (or food of any kind!); Pre-printed “thank you” notes to individuals, teams, or entire faculty; Your blessing to leave 20 minutes early one day; A donation from petty cash for a new book for class/ library.
6. **Evaluate your plan.** Consider what types of data will help you determine if you have successfully addressed your PQ.
7. **Write a plan.**



Time: _____

Strategies: _____

Resources: _____

8. **Schedule you next appointment.**





When good things begin to happen . . . they quit talking about it in the parking lot

—**Alison Boggs, Principal**
Adams City Middle School

Appointment #5:

*HOW WILL I KNOW IF THE
ISSUE IS BEING RESOLVED?*


You may be able to find out what you need to know through existing methods or you may need to create some evaluation process for your plan. Which ever applies, it is important to set up an appointment that will help you (and others) evaluate the results of your plan.

1. **Link the evaluation directly to the question.** Keep the evaluation process simple and directed at answering your initial PQ.
 - If the data tell you that the issues raised in the initial question are being addressed successfully, then it's time to look at sustaining the momentum you have created. This is the time to set up structures to support and refine ongoing efforts directed at this question and its related issues.



2. **Back to our sample, questions you could ask include:**

OUR SAMPLE



IS 3RD GRADE NOW SENDING HOME A WEEKLY UPDATE?

HAS THIS HELPED IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS?

IN MAKING RANDOM PHONE CALLS TO HOMES, IS IT CLEAR THAT MORE PARENTS ARE GETTING AND READING THE SCHOOL NEWSLETTER NOW THAT IT IS MAILED?


HOW ARE WE GOING TO RESTRUCTURE CONFERENCES SO MORE PARENTS WILL ATTEND?

3. **Modify structures, supports, actions, and practices based upon your data.** If the data tell you that the issues raised in the initial PQ are not being addressed successfully then it is time to look at the reasons and revise your initial plan accordingly. You may need to alter the configuration of resources, the deployment of personnel, the knowledge base of teachers, or your own decisions or administrative practices to make a positive difference. This is an important step in the process because it institutionalizes the changes you sought to make.



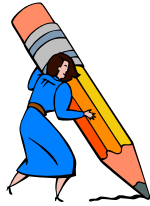
4. Using our sample.

OUR SAMPLE



PERHAPS 3RD GRADE BEGAN
SENDING THOSE WEEKLY
UPDATES BUT AFTER A FEW
WEEKS HAS STOPPED OR BEEN
SPOBADIO IN SENDING THEM
HOME.

5. Link the evaluation directly to the question.



6. **Good enough? Move on.** Have you successfully addressed your initial PQ? If so, you can now move on to address the next PQ. Don't forget to monitor progress of your initial PQ. Set a date one month from now, and four months from now, to revisit your initial PQ.

7. **Make another appointment.** There are actually two more appointments you need to make!!





Eating chocolate won't solve your problems,
but it doesn't hurt anything either!

—Anonymous

Appointments #6 and #7: *CELEBRATE*

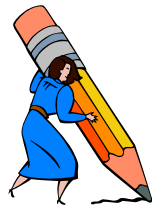
Set up one or two 30-minute appointments—one with anyone who helped in this process and one for yourself.

Appointment #6:

Schedule one appointment to celebrate the success of all those involved in this process. The celebration need not be elaborate, but some recognition of the time, effort, and interest of others is needed. You are more likely to sustain their investment in resolving building-wide issues when your collaborators feel valued and a part of the process—from start to finish.

Appointment #7:

Schedule the other appointment to congratulate and reward yourself on completing an important school improvement project. Take a few minutes to reflect on the process, your role in it, and how you will use it to address the next PQ in your school.



7 Steps in Inquiry-Based Decision Making

- **Write down your priority question (PQ).**
- **Rewrite your PQ as a measurable question.**
- **Write down everything you think you know about your PQ.**
- **Write down your missing information.**
- **Review and understand your data.**
- **Write a plan (time, strategies, and resources).**
- **Link the evaluation directly to the question.**