



Success at the Core: **How Teams and Teachers Transform** **Instruction** Results of the Pilot Evaluation in Washington State

Prepared by Inverness Research
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Success at the Core (*SaC*) is a web-based suite of materials, or a “toolkit,” designed for middle schools to use to advocate for and to practice high quality classroom instruction.¹ The *SaC* toolkit comprises seven Leadership Development (LD) Modules, designed for use by facilitated school leadership teams, and twenty-four Teacher Development (TD) Strategies, intended for self-directed use by individual classroom teachers or groups of teachers. Education Development Center (EDC) commissioned Inverness Research² to conduct an independent formative evaluation of the pilot of *SaC* in Washington state schools. The study involved eleven middle schools and one district. (See Design and Methods of the Pilot Evaluation for a full description.) *SaC* was piloted from fall 2009 through spring 2010. This report presents summary findings from the pilot evaluation.

Summary Assessment

Results of the pilot show that *SaC* is of very high quality, both substantively and in its design. *SaC* is neither a top-down one-size-fits-all program, nor a grab bag of tricks. Rather, *SaC*'s great strength is that it is a carefully designed toolkit that a very wide range of school teams and teachers can use effectively. The leadership and teaching practices that *SaC* promotes are relevant and appealing to many middle school professionals. Furthermore, the great majority of pilot leadership teams and teachers found that *SaC* modules and strategies gave them the means to enact practices and take

¹ *Success at the Core* is being developed by Vulcan Productions in partnership with Education Development Center (EDC) and Woody Creek Productions.

² Inverness Research is an independent national education evaluation and research group. See www.inverness-research.org.

concrete steps that began moving them closer to their own visions of professionalized school culture and engaging, high quality instruction.

SaC is based on professional literature that reflects the best thinking available from the field. The literature identifies effective school leadership, strong professional cultures in schools, and effective classroom instruction that engages students in rigorous content as key elements of successful middle schools (for example, Bransford, et al., 1999; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Heller, et al., 2003; and Marzano, 2003). Results of the pilot suggest that usage of *SaC* helps to promote growth and improvement in these areas.

Because *SaC* addresses a felt need in the field, because it is of high quality and is readily usable, and because usage of it promotes improvement in critically important areas, we believe *SaC* has strong potential to make a substantial long-term contribution to middle schools' instructional improvement efforts.

Evaluation of *SaC* against Five Key Criteria

Data collection and analysis were anchored to five broad criteria that are vital to the potential of *SaC* to achieve its aim: quality, relevance, usability, value, and impact.

QUALITY OF THE MATERIALS

The quality of the full suite of *SaC* materials is very high. In both the Leadership and Teacher Development components, the videos stood out for everyone as exceptionally high in quality. The LD modules and TD strategies are comprehensive. The supports for implementation—facilitation guides in LD, lesson overviews and artifacts in TD, various handouts for both sets—are also of high quality overall. Importantly, the components of the toolkit did for the pilot users what they purported to do: the stated goals for the materials and the experiences of the users were congruent with one another. Furthermore, the materials display an overall tone of respectful professionalism and a stance of commitment to good teaching.

RELEVANCE TO TARGETED USERS

Both leadership teams and teacher piloters found the materials to be highly relevant. First, there was a high degree of congruence between the users' own visions of their ideal school cultures and classrooms and the stated goals and offerings of the *SaC* materials. The *SaC* topics, the questions, the strategies, and the research-based resources all resonated with the pilot users' perceptions of the school improvement climate within which they were working. More importantly, the materials spoke to a felt need. These school leaders, along with many of the teachers, felt they had lacked the know-how capacity to enact their visions, and the *SaC* materials helped them take real steps toward realizing their improvement goals. Even for experienced teachers, the TD strategies inspired them to maintain their highest standards of practice and renew their commitment to designing active learning. Finally, it was important and relevant to the piloters that they recognized the schools, teachers, and students as their fellow Washingtonians.

USABILITY IN SCHOOL CONTEXT

The usability of the materials is a real hallmark of *SaC*. Pilot users found the website readily understandable and easy to navigate, and found the materials to be clearly organized. With preparation, facilitators and teachers were able to put the modules or strategies to use with confidence and could garner the results they had been led to expect. Most importantly, the materials are both well structured and flexible. The LD modules were used well by teams of a wide variety of configurations (teacher- or principal-led) and parts of them were used effectively with other audiences and purposes. Pilot teachers found that the TD materials were readily applicable to different content areas. Some teachers found that the TD strategies—especially the videos—also served well as the focus for team or PLC discussions. In fact, usage of LD or TD materials often kick-started a positive feedback cycle that led to ongoing and increasingly skillful usage.

VALUE FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

The experiences of using the *SaC* materials helped the great majority of users to build skills and capacities they recognize as important.

The Leadership Development modules had great value in enabling leadership teams to achieve the collegial relationships that are vital to developing professional learning communities, and they gave these teams the tools to foster professional discussions that really did focus on instructional improvement. At the same time, some leadership teams said the modules do not go “far enough”—they wanted more guidance in making the link between the leadership work and real instructional improvement. Most leadership teams plan to continue using the LD modules following the pilot year.

The Teacher Development strategies were valuable in giving teachers the know-how and the inspiration to put into practice teaching approaches that they believe in, but either did not know how to do or had not put the effort into doing well or consistently. The Teacher Development strategies also showed real potential to be valuable for focusing dialogue in school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) on effective teaching practices. The immediate positive results of TD usage motivated most teachers to continue using them on their own beyond the requirements of the pilot.

IMPACT ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, PROFESSIONAL CULTURE, INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE, AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING

The LD modules had observable impact on the areas of building leadership capacity and strengthening professional culture. Professional dialogue within pilot school leadership teams became more focused on instructional improvement, with an underlying improvement in tone and the quality of relationships. Leadership teams became more clear and confident about their role. The TD strategies led to changes or refinements in pilot teachers’ classroom practices. Teachers reported that these changes improved the quality of students’ learning experiences, including greater engagement with the content and with one another, and more responsible participation in their own learning.

Lessons Learned about the Context of Usage

As with all externally developed interventions, *SaC* did not operate in neutral or inert context conditions. Several contextual forces in Washington State affected how schools understood *SaC*, whether they agreed to participate in the pilot, and to some extent, how pilot usage played out.

One important lesson learned from the pilot is that a minimum threshold of contextual capacity—including the perceived congruence between *SaC* and state and local visions of improvement, felt need among school-based leaders for leadership resources, some degree of school autonomy, and presence of professional time outside of teaching—was needed as a prerequisite to interest and to effective usage. A second lesson is that usage of *SaC* actually ameliorated some contextual constraints on reform efforts, for example, by helping leaders and teachers make productive use of professional collaboration time and sparking renewed commitment to active and student-centered teaching.

SALIENT CONTEXT CONDITIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON INTEREST AND USAGE

The current popularity of “professional learning communities” (PLCs). Like many states, Washington promotes PLCs³ as a mechanism of reform, and most pilot schools were in districts mandating implementation of PLCs. However, many of the schools were receiving very little “how-to” support enabling them to make PLCs rich and effective. School leaders who agreed to participate believed that the *SaC* toolkit would provide substantive support for addressing this mandate. Pilot usage showed this to be true.

School principals and National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) need resources for leadership. Washington has a large and active network of NBCTs. They, along with many principals, hold strong visions of improvement; however, they often lack the experience and resources adequate to helping their schools realize those visions. Because these leaders perceived that the toolkit’s intent and contents were consistent with their own visions, they were a primary source of interest in piloting the toolkit. Pilot usage further demonstrated that these leaders have professional knowledge enabling them to help translate the materials to the unique dynamics of their school contexts. The toolkit served their needs because it was ready-made and usable, of high quality, independent (neutral), and research-based.

District reform agendas. Schools considering use of *SaC* perceived district reform efforts—their substantive focus and/or their time demands—to be either consistent or in conflict with *SaC*. Schools that perceived a conflict opted out of the pilot. All schools felt it was important to garner district sanction to participate. In some pilot schools and the one pilot district, *SaC* was seen as a means to enhance district reforms.

Diminishing time for professional collaboration and learning. All schools were reducing staff work time because of budget cuts. Some schools opted out of the pilot because they had no discretionary time available. Pilot schools varied greatly in how difficult it was to schedule time for the preparation and the meetings that the *SaC* LD modules require; it was important that the *SaC* modules were flexible enough to be used well in range of time slots. Pilot teachers were able to

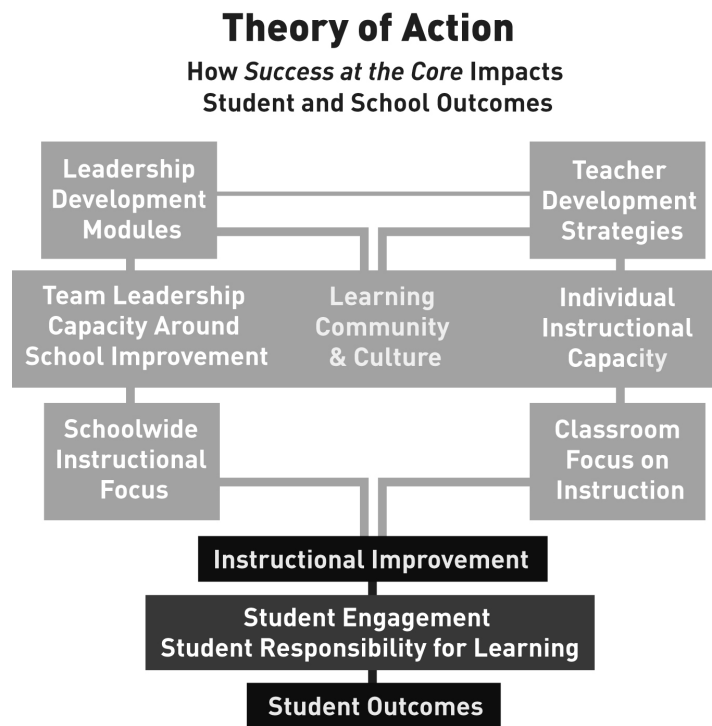
³ “PLCs” as vital contributors to improvement is a strong theme in current education literature. The most familiar resource cited in *SaC* and by many school leaders in Washington is DuFour and Eaker (1998).

fulfill the requirements of the pilot and to continue using the strategies they piloted, but would require more time than they had during the year to explore additional toolkit usage as much as they would like.

How Usage of *SaC* Can Strengthen Instructional Improvement

The piloting of *SaC* in real schools helped to flesh out a theory of action, or logic model, of how we would expect the toolkit to function for the improvement of instruction when fully used over a longer period of time. The pilot evaluation provides qualitative evidence that use of Leadership Development modules and Teacher Development strategies helps to strengthen leadership, professional community and culture, and teachers' instructional capacity. Through continued usage of *SaC*, these capacities in turn strengthen the focus of school improvement work on instruction and re-focus classroom practice on active, student-centered, rigorous instruction. Teachers' uses of Teacher Development strategies immediately promote student engagement and responsibility for their own learning. The diagram below portrays the logic of how *SaC* functions.

Figure 1. Logic Model of *SaC* Usage and Impact



PROMOTING SYNERGISTIC USE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT MATERIALS

The Leadership Development modules and Teacher Development strategies are distinct sets of materials, that is, two halves of a toolkit. While there is theoretical congruence between the two sets (they derive from the same research base on successful middle schools), they were not designed for integrated use. Furthermore, the design of the evaluation was such that the designated leadership teams focused on piloting LD modules, while the pilot teachers focused on using TD strategies.

The evaluation did not focus on how the two sets of materials might work in some concerted fashion. In a few pilot schools, however, pilots began to see ways in which the LD and TD materials could work together. Some teacher-pilots who were also members of leadership teams employed leadership skills they gained from the LD modules and began promoting usage of TD materials among their colleagues. A few leadership teams familiarized themselves with TD materials and began exploring ways to expand usage. These first steps at cross-pollination and synergistic use of the two sets of materials were very promising.

We suspect that optimal use of *SaC*—that is, use that ultimately generates the desirable improvement outcomes—will involve forms of integrated usage of both sets of materials, that is, usage of the full toolkit. As part of our formative feedback to the developers, we have recommended that they highlight conceptual connections across the LD and TD materials and promote usage of the full complement of materials.

The Need for Further Research

The selected leadership teams and teachers piloted *SaC* materials within the 2009-2010 school year. This fairly compacted timeframe, along with the design of the pilot, meant that usage was somewhat engineered for purposes of the evaluation, rather than fully naturalistic. Further evaluation and research will be needed in schools where usage of *SaC* occurs without external influence to document similar results. Moreover, research on longer-term use of *SaC* will be needed to verify its potential for sustained use over time and to document the student outcomes that can emanate from stronger schoolwide instructional improvement focus and greater student engagement and responsibility for learning.

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