SRI Theory of Action

“The School Reform Initiative creates transformational learning communities that are fiercely committed to educational equity and excellence.” This mission challenges educators to not only “Work with determination to ensure equal access to quality learning in a way that achieves equitable outcomes for each student (SRI Guiding Principle),” but also to work collaboratively, persistently, and intentionally in unfamiliar “ways that challenge each other’s assumptions (SRI Guiding Principle).” SRI’s intentional learning communities are transformational because they not only help teachers improve their practice, but they also help educators question their fundamental assumptions about teaching, learning, students, and the purpose of schools. The goal is to create new educational practices that are built on more robust, equitable assumptions. All of this happens in the service of significant learning outcomes for each and every student.

The School Reform Initiative carries out its mission by...

- **Working over time in order to (1) build relationships based on a commitment to the principles of critical friendship and (2) better understand the context in which transformational learning takes place.** SRI often begins its work by introducing a specific service or product. However, SRI understands that the organization’s best work is done over time as it builds relationships with individuals, schools, and districts/networks. Transformational learning does not happen quickly because it is very much dependent on educators ability to build a school culture that is characterized by critical friendship, that is, by the ability to be reflective, give and receive useful feedback, focus persistently on teaching and learning, and commit to surfacing and examining closely held assumptions. Working over time and building relationships allows SRI to both understand the context of its efforts, and use that understanding to inform its work and co-create new learning with its partners. SRI works in context-specific, sustained relationships.

- **Using structured conversations.** SRI uses a variety of dialogue-based protocols designed to help adults in schools collaborate, deprivatize their practice, give each other useful feedback, focus on teaching and learning, and build shared norms and values. In some learning communities these protocols are implemented as “recipes or scripts,” with an emphasis on “getting them right.” As groups move toward becoming more transformational learning communities, SRI helps them understand the deep structures upon which protocols are built. They are no longer recipes, but purposeful tools used in service of a group’s learning goals. SRI uses protocols to create different—but much needed—conversations among educators.

- **Modeling skilled facilitation and coaching.** SRI models and provides the skilled facilitation needed for adult learning and development, as well as organizational growth. As a learning community begins, an SRI-trained facilitator may facilitate the group’s work. However, as a group moves toward becoming a more transformational community, SRI facilitators work to help everyone in the community become a skilled facilitator. Facilitation expertise is deeply understood and shared in such communities. SRI also acknowledges that, in building transformational learning communities, there is
often a need for a coach who does not necessarily facilitate, but rather holds and asks the difficult questions, names the tensions in the group's work, and attends to the larger goals of equity, excellence, and school reinvention. SRI models and provides support for the development of both facilitation and coaching.

- **Supporting both adult learning and adult development.** SRI understands that adult learning and adult development can be usefully seen as different concepts. In effective learning communities, there is considerable adult learning. Adult learning happens as educators learn new strategies and techniques and refine what they already know. SRI supports such adult learning. However, adult development takes place in transformational learning communities and is different from adult learning. Adult learning happens when educators improve a teaching practice; adult development happens when educators consider whom the practice serves, why it is used, and where unexamined assumptions about the practice come from. Transformational learning communities promote adult development by helping educators embrace increasingly complex and uncomfortable questions, and the challenges of “being fiercely committed to educational equity and excellence.” SRI fosters adult learning and development.

- **Focusing on school improvement and school reinvention.** Intentionally and persistently, SRI maintains a focus on improving instructional practice. However, SRI also understands that while improving teaching practice can indeed improve schools, schools only reinvent themselves into equitable and educationally excellent places when they have a persistent and clear focus on that challenging goal and develop the courage, skills, and will needed to make school reinvention happen. SRI helps educators improve instructional practice and do the hard work of improving and reinventing schools.

- **Engaging formal and informal leadership.** SRI works closely with district and school-based leaders to grow transformational learning communities. SRI understands that the more involved formal leadership is in the work of adult learning and development, the more likely that work is to succeed. However, SRI also understands that the engine that powers both school improvement and school reinvention is teacher leadership. Creating transformational learning is a risky enterprise for both formal and informal leaders. SRI works with all leaders to take the risks and build the skills that transformational learning requires.