CABE Connecticut Association of Boards of Education

EDUCATION. ADVOCACY. SUPPORT.

The Instructional Core

What it is and why it's important for boards of education

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Agenda

- Introductions
- How we got here (10 Minutes)
- Overview of The Core Framework (20 Minutes)
- Implications for Boards of Education (10 Minutes)
- Instructional Core Exercise (20 Minutes)
- Questions? (5 Minutes)

Superintendents



Board Members



Board Members



What do your board members talk about?

The Killer B's













Instructional Core - Glossary of Terms

Core Components

- **Instructional Core**: The continuous interaction between teacher, student, and content. If a policy or resource does not alter this three-way relationship, it will not directly improve student learning.
- **Teacher Engagement**: How teachers represent, structure, and teach content. Governance support in this area focuses on effective professional development, coaching, and instructional capacity.
- **Student Engagement**: The active role students play in their own learning. True engagement goes beyond compliance to include critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-directed task commitment.
- **Content / Task**: The actual rigor and substance of what students are asked to learn and do. It encompasses curriculum alignment, standards, and classroom assignments.

Key Operational Terms

- **Academic Task**: The specific work students are asked to perform in the classroom. Elmore's rule of thumb states: "*Task predicts performance.*" Real learning gains occur when the complexity of the task matches high expectations.
- **Instructional Rounds**: A collaborative observation process adapted from medical rounds, where educators and board members gather descriptive (non-judgmental) evidence about the instructional core to identify patterns and system-wide improvement needs.
- **Instructional Capacity**: The collective knowledge, skills, and resources that a school system brings to bear on teaching and learning.
- **Instructional Strategy**: The specific pedagogical methods, techniques, and approaches educators use to deliver content and facilitate student mastery.
- **Curriculum Alignment**: The intentional synchronization between state/district standards, taught curriculum (what teachers deliver), and assessed curriculum (what tests measure).
- **Internal Accountability**: The shared values, mutual expectations, and internal commitment within a school district that drive performance before external accountability systems (such as state testing) take effect.
- **Rigor**: The level of cognitive demand required by classroom tasks and assessments, encouraging students to analyze, evaluate, and create rather than simply memorize facts.

What is the Instructional Core?

The Critical Interaction

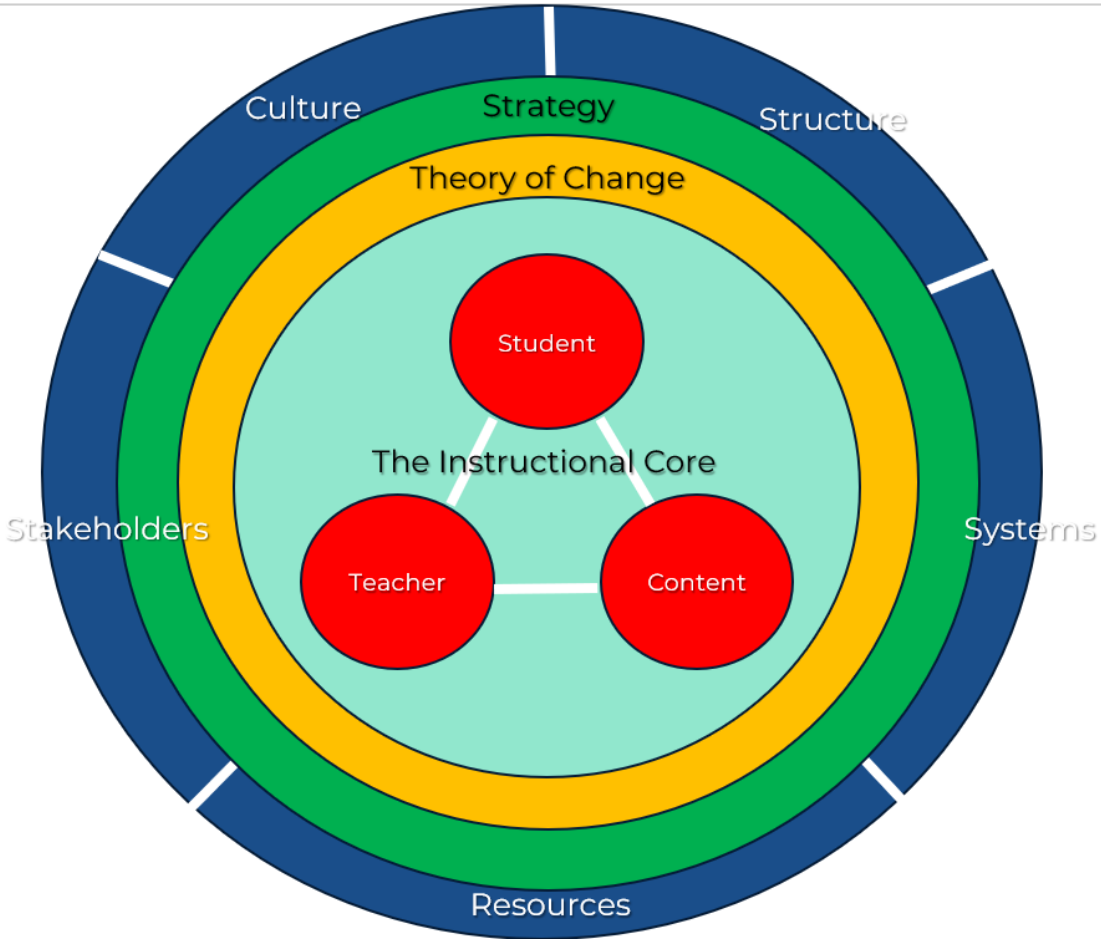
The instructional core consists of the **teacher** and the **student** in the presence of **content**

...and how they interact.

The Coherence Rule

To improve student learning, you must impact the core. If a policy or resource doesn't change the interaction within the core, it won't change the result.

The Interaction is the Key

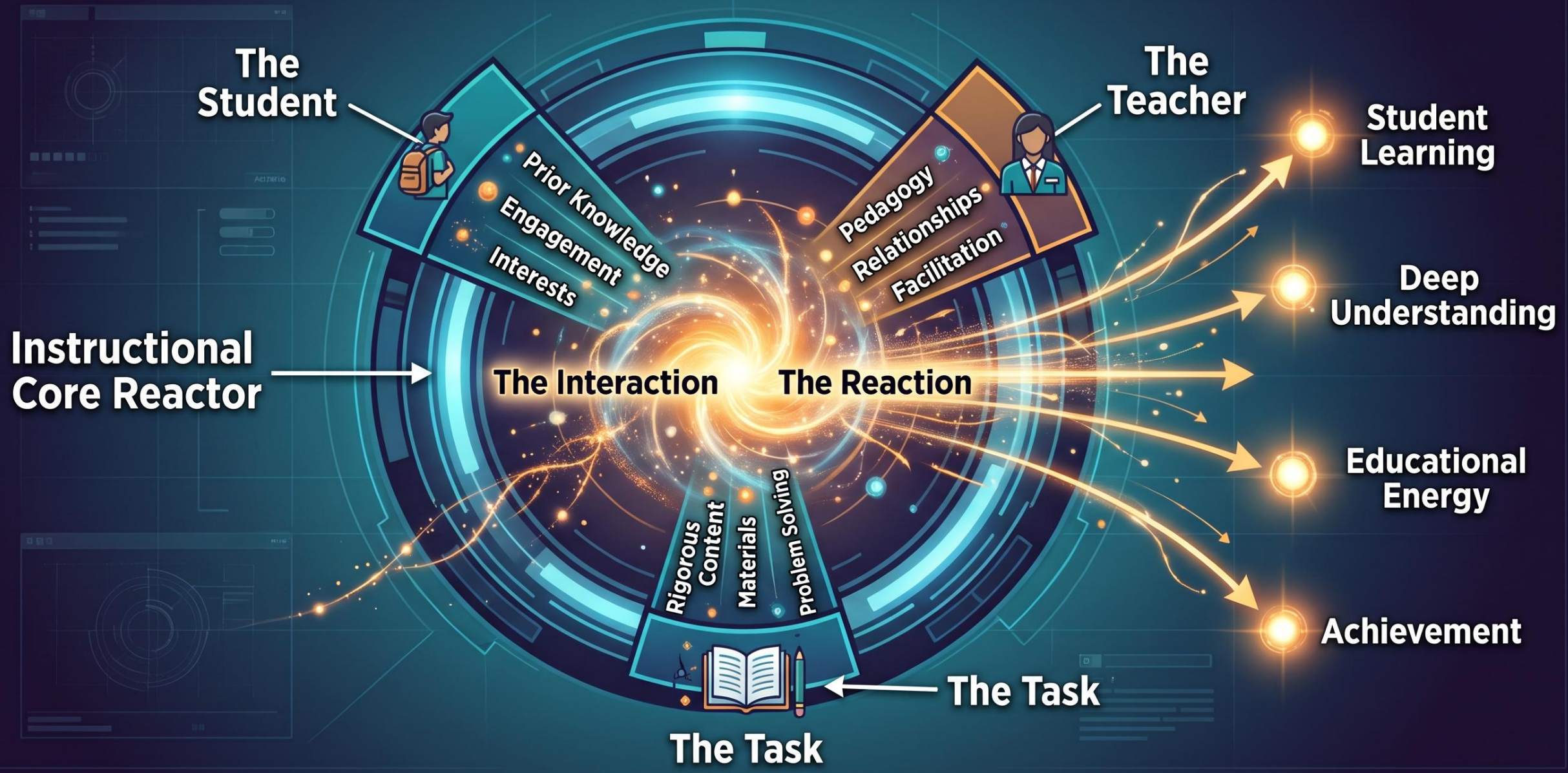


The Instructional Triangle

The teacher's skill
The student's engagement
The complexity of the content.

Focusing on any single point of the triangle in isolation (e.g., just buying new books/programs) is insufficient to improve student achievement.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL CORE AS A REACTOR



It's not just having the components—it is the interaction between them that generates energy and outcomes!

Three Ways to Improve Learning – What are Supts looking for?



Teacher Skill

Increase the level of knowledge and requisite pedagogical skills.



Content Rigor/Challenge

Increase the level and complexity of the content that students are asked to learn.



Student Role

Change the role of the student in the instructional process from passive to active.

The Seven Principles

Foundations of Instructional Rounds – Teams on a Mission

From the Theoretical to the Observable

Dr. Richard Elmore, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Principles 1-3: Foundations

1

Improve the Interaction

Learning only improves as a consequence of improvements in the core elements' interaction.

2

Change One, Change All

If you change one element, you must change the other two to affect student learning.

3

Evidence Based

If you can't see it in the core, it's not there.

Principles 4-7: Practice

4

The Task

What students are *actually* doing.
What is observable.

5

Accountability

Beyond test scores.
What are students doing?
At what level of performance?

6

Doing the Work

We learn to do the work by doing the work, fostering a culture of practice.

7

Description before analysis, analysis before prediction, prediction before evaluation.
Observe instruction, objectively describe what teachers and students are saying and doing, analyze patterns without judgment, anticipate outcomes, and evaluate efficacy only at the final stage.

Impact in the Classroom

- When the instructional core is high-functioning, we see students taking ownership of their learning.
- Teachers move from being "deliverers of content" to "facilitators of thinking."
- Schools become Communities of Learners



This is where our strategic investments must be directed.

A REACTOR THAT LIGHTS UP THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY



A vibrant, connected community, lit up by a highly functioning instructional core

Systemic Roles in Supporting the Core

Level of System	Primary Focus on the Core
Board of Education	Vision, Policy Alignment and Resource Allocation
Superintendent	Strategic, System-Wide Implementation
School Leadership	Observing, Mentoring, and Aligning Instruction
Teacher	Developing and implementing engaging *instructional tasks*

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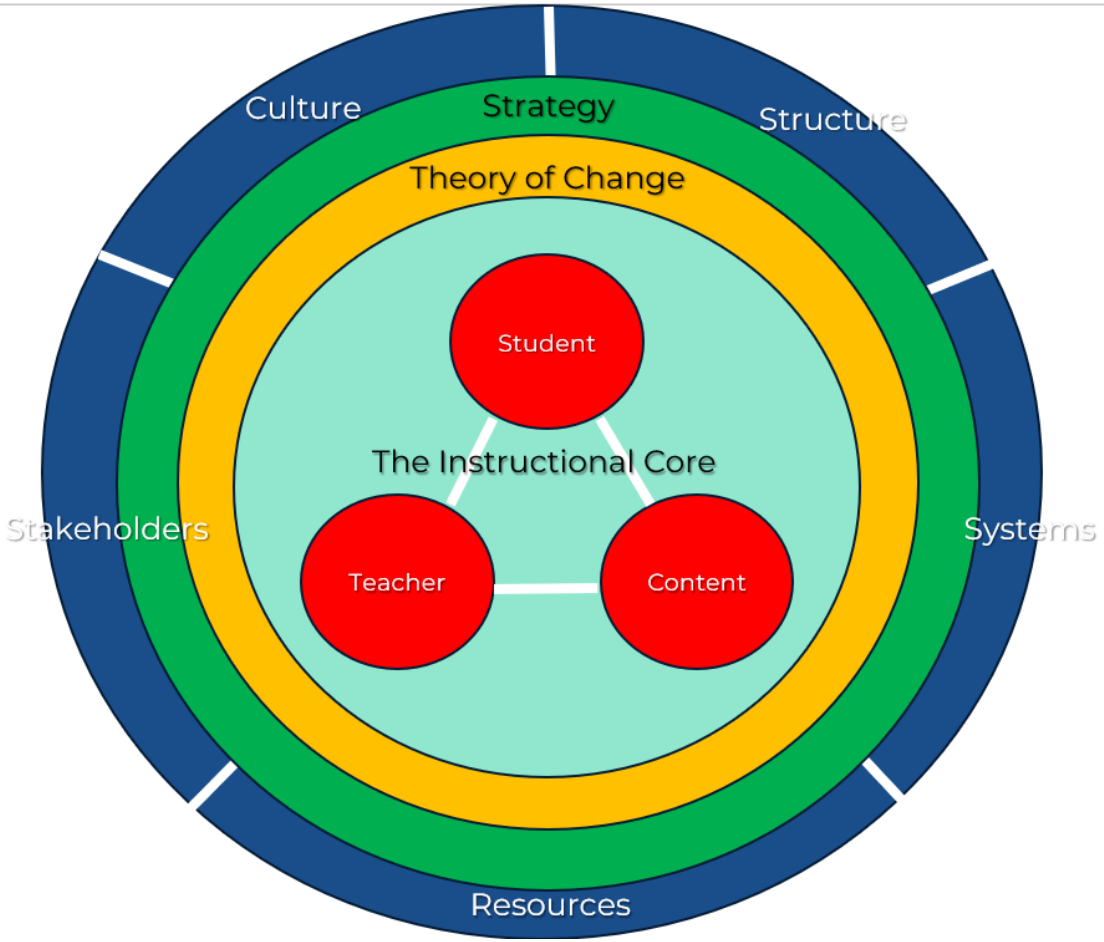

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Implications for Boards of Education

- **Strategic Alignment:** Every board decision should be evaluated by its potential impact on the core interaction
- **Coherence:** Be mindful of the impact actions have on all three elements of the core
- **Support Systems:** Ensure systems such as professional development increase teacher and instructional capacity, (Reciprocity of Accountability)
- **Monitoring:** Ask for data that reflects the quality of instructional tasks and student engagement

An Important Role of the Board is to Establish Vision

Center for Public Education

cpe

8 Characteristics of Effective School Boards

FranklinCovey Education

Great Boards

CONNECTICUT LIGHTHOUSE

IASB Iowa Association of School Boards

5 Roles of Effective School Boards

nsba National School Boards Association



Implications for Boards of Education

Implications for Boards of Education

What are POLICY implications for the board?

Implications for Boards of Education

What are OPERATIONAL implications for the board?

Implications for Boards of Education

What are RESOURCE implications for the board?

Strategic Questions to Ask the Superintendent

Focus Area	
Content & Task	Does our adopted curriculum match the level of thinking/learning expected?
Teacher Support	How does our professional development program directly improve instruction in the classroom?
Student Impact	What evidence demonstrates high-levels of student engagement?
Resource Allocation	Are we funding initiatives that directly enhance the instructional core?

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What are other questions you might want to ask?

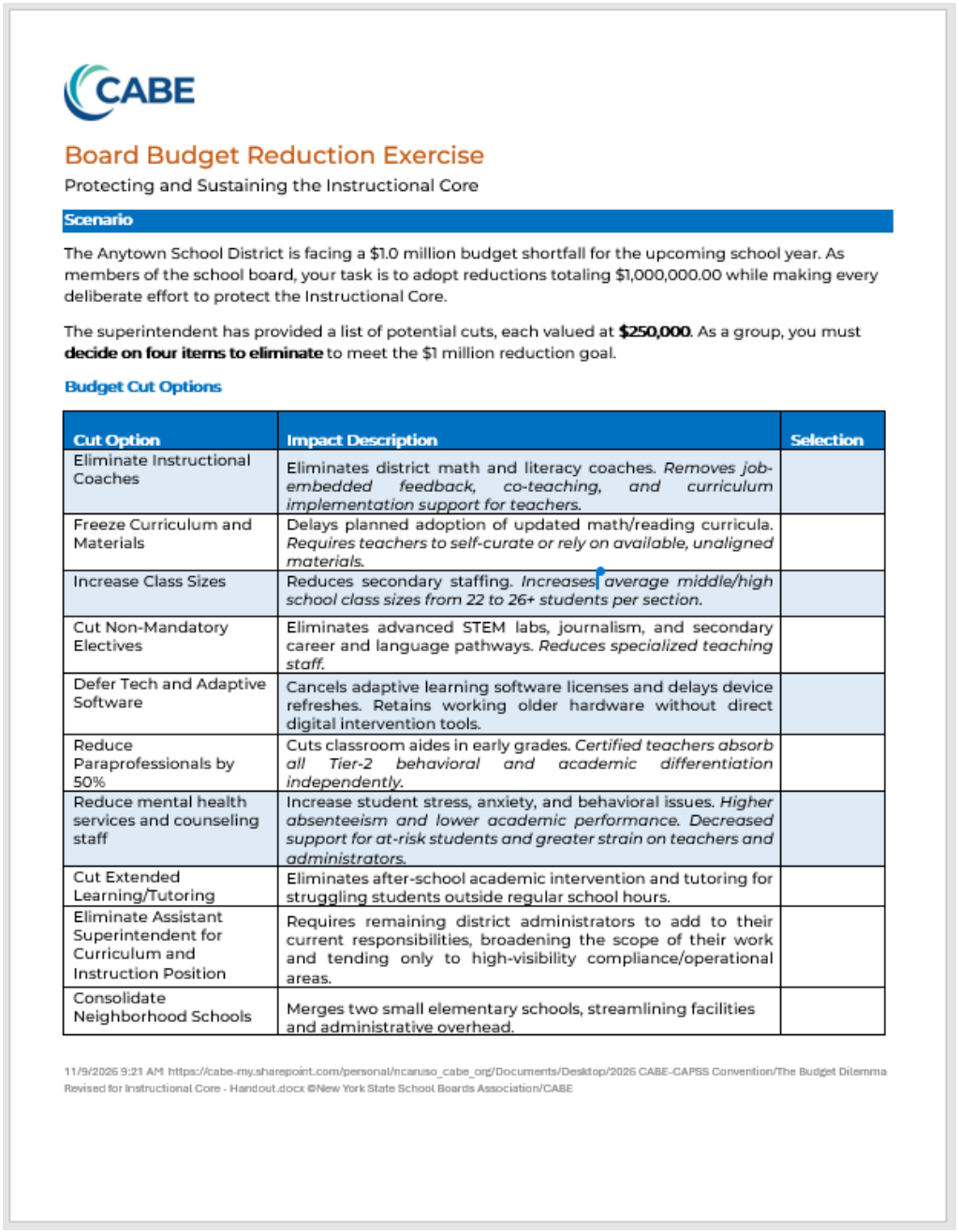
Board/Superintendent Team



Now, what should *they* talking about?

Exercise:

With a partner, look at the following budget choices and determine which are most important.



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Board Budget Reduction Exercise

Protecting and Sustaining the Instructional Core

Scenario

The Anytown School District is facing a $1.0 million budget shortfall for the upcoming school year. As members of the school board, your task is to adopt reductions totaling $1,000,000.00 while making every deliberate effort to protect the Instructional Core.

The superintendent has provided a list of potential cuts, each valued at **$250,000**. As a group, you must **decide on four items to eliminate** to meet the $1 million reduction goal.

Budget Cut Options

Cut Option	Impact Description	Selection
Eliminate Instructional Coaches	Eliminates district math and literacy coaches. *Removes job-embedded feedback, co-teaching, and curriculum implementation support for teachers.*	
Freeze Curriculum and Materials	Delays planned adoption of updated math/reading curricula. *Requires teachers to self-curate or rely on available, unaligned materials.*	
Increase Class Sizes	Reduces secondary staffing. *Increases average middle/high school class sizes from 22 to 26+ students per section.*	
Cut Non-Mandatory Electives	Eliminates advanced STEM labs, journalism, and secondary career and language pathways. *Reduces specialized teaching staff.*	
Defer Tech and Adaptive Software	Cancels adaptive learning software licenses and delays device refreshes. Retains working older hardware without direct digital intervention tools.	
Reduce Paraprofessionals by 50%	Cuts classroom aides in early grades. *Certified teachers absorb all Tier-2 behavioral and academic differentiation independently.*	
Reduce mental health services and counseling staff	Increase student stress, anxiety, and behavioral issues. *Higher absenteeism and lower academic performance. Decreased support for at-risk students and greater strain on teachers and administrators.*	
Cut Extended Learning/Tutoring	Eliminates after-school academic intervention and tutoring for struggling students outside regular school hours.	
Eliminate Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Position	Requires remaining district administrators to add to their current responsibilities, broadening the scope of their work and tending only to high-visibility compliance/operational areas.	
Consolidate Neighborhood Schools	Merges two small elementary schools, streamlining facilities and administrative overhead.	

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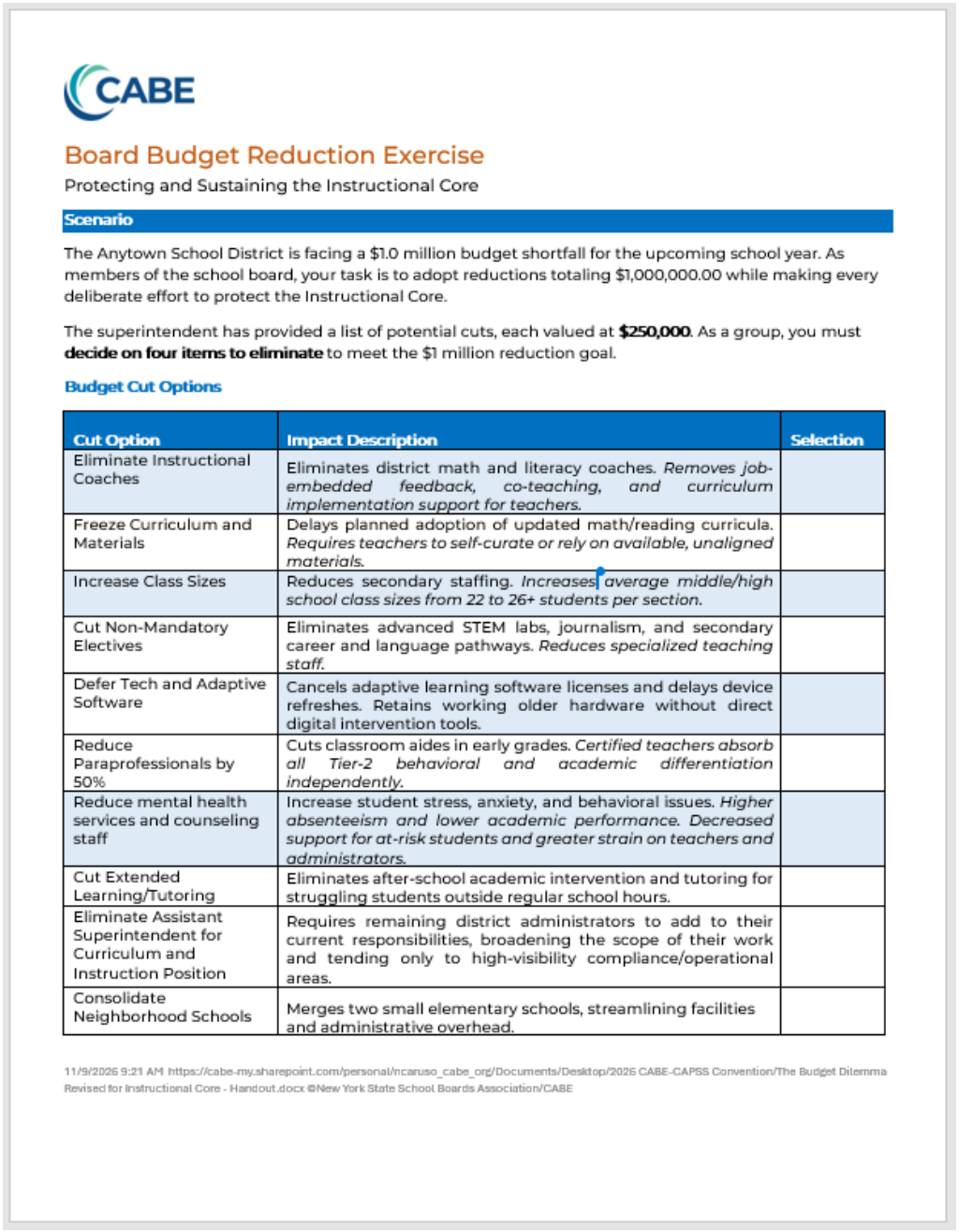
Exercise:

What did you choose and why?



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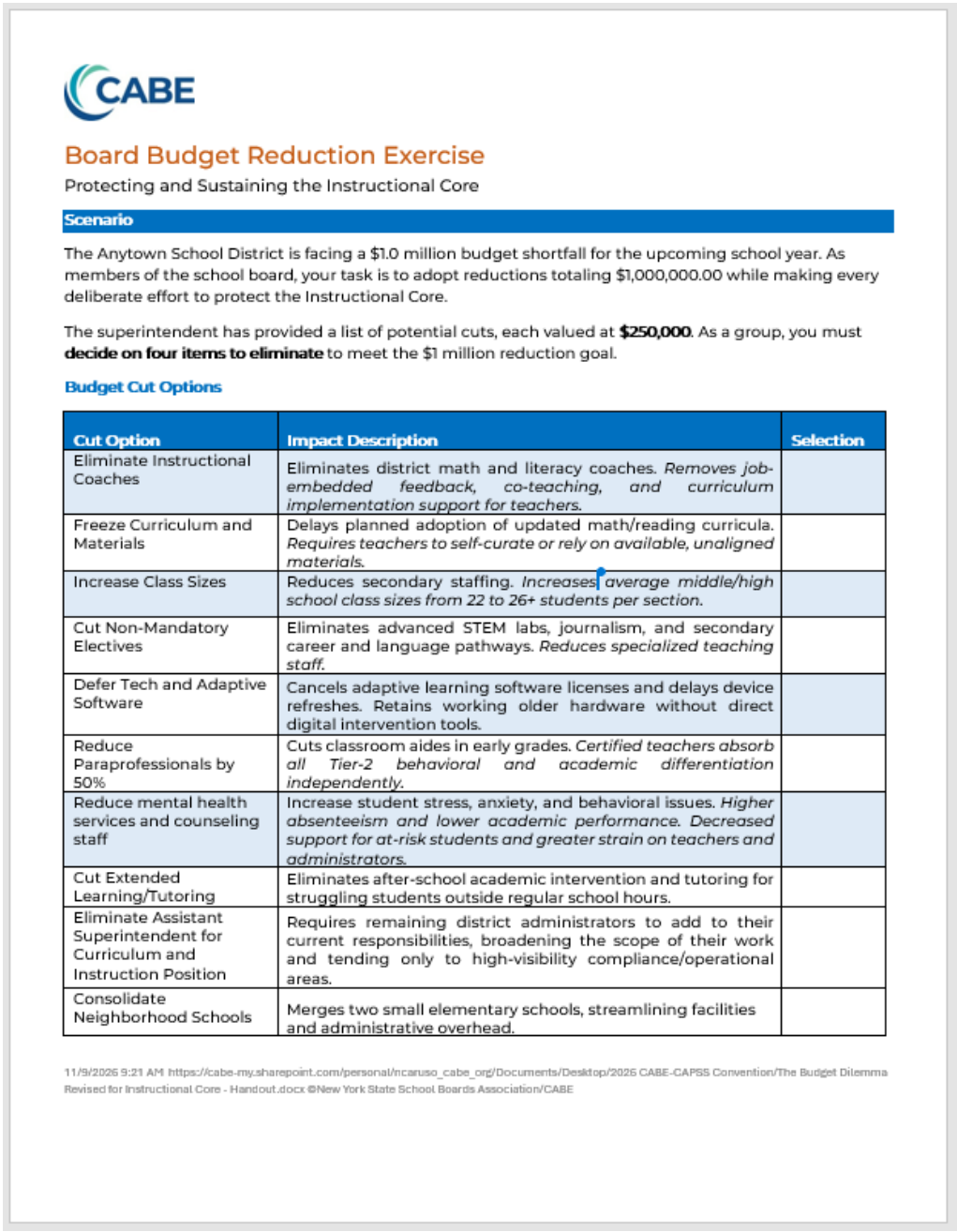
Exercise:

What did you choose and why?

Were there items that you might have chosen differently yesterday?



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