

Systematic Review

A Systematic Literature Review on the Development and Implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) Around the World

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Abstract

Many countries around the world require some or all schools to develop and implement a school improvement plan (SIP), which is a tool intended to guide the identification of school-specific needs for improvement along with a series of priorities, goals, and actions to help address those needs. Yet, the literature on this topic remains rather sparse. In this article, we conducted a systematic review of the international literature on SIPs published from 2010 through 2025, identifying 62 relevant articles for analysis. We organized this review's findings around six areas related to SIP development and implementation: assessing current conditions, determining needs, setting direction, organizing resources, taking action, and evaluating progress. Findings suggest that while divergences exist between contexts with respect to these six areas, there are considerable convergences in how educators and others conceptualize and interact with SIPs. We close with recommendations for future research that both strengthens and broadens the extant literature on SIPs.

Keywords: school improvement plans; school leadership; planning; change leadership; educational policy



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1. Introduction

The development and implementation of school improvement plans (SIPs) as a formal way for school leaders to enact change for organizational improvement has become common worldwide. While some planning efforts have long been part of the work of effective school leaders (Edmonds, 1979; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2016), the formal use of SIPs appears to be a relatively newer phenomenon. Such use is now embedded into various educational policies and organizational practices around the world as a tool for prompting school leaders to be intentional in leading school improvement efforts and hold leaders accountable for doing so (Broadhead et al., 1998; McNamara et al., 2002; Mintrop et al., 2001).

Research suggests that SIPs can positively influence organizational practices and student outcomes (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Fernandez, 2011; Strunk et al., 2016), but SIP development and implementation are often not of high enough quality to actually drive improvement efforts that lead to sustained positive influence over time (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020). Many studies have been conducted in different contexts to assess and report on SIPs, but, to our knowledge, no recent systematic review of research has been published (Beach & Lindahl, 2004). Thus, we conducted a systematic review of research on SIPs to better understand the convergences and divergences

in SIP contents and processes within and across different contexts. Better understanding the development, implementation, and monitoring of high-quality SIPs seems necessary to determine whether and how school leaders can leverage SIPs to improve schools.

In the next section, we set the stage about why this review matters by situating it in related areas of literature on SIPs. Specifically, we detail what SIPs are and include, how policies and high-stakes accountability systems have contributed to their proliferation, and what we currently know about if and how they might influence organizational and student outcomes. We then provide an overview of our methods, including our organizing tool for SIP processes to establish the parameters for what literature was reviewed, analyzed, and reported. The bulk of this article focused on the presentation of findings then follows. We close with a discussion of our findings by considering areas of convergence and divergence and identifying points for consideration both for practice and research.

2. Setting the Stage

To set the stage for this systematic review, we briefly consider relevant literature with respect to SIPs. We first provide an overview of what SIPs are and the ways in which they are intended to be used by school leaders to guide school improvement efforts. We then highlight how policies, especially in high-stakes accountability environments, shape and constrain SIP development and implementation. Lastly, we note the results of studies that have considered if and how SIPs are related to and/or influence organizational and student outcomes, as well as why reliance on those studies to determine the value of SIPs may be misleading.

2.1. An Overview of School Improvement Plans (SIPs)

SIPs are formal documents intended to guide school-level actions for improving organizational and student performance and outcomes. To realize such improvement, SIPs serve as a centralizing tool in which school vision, goals, priorities, actions, resource allocations, and more can be aggregated and organized to strategize and articulate a roadmap to intentionally advance a school from its current state to a more optimal state (Aaron et al., 2024; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). This movement requires a SIP to account for goals and strategies within clear time periods so school leaders and others can determine if a school is on track to successfully implement (and is successfully implementing) the SIP (Stevenson & Weiner, 2020). SIPs are often conceptualized to have organizational outcomes that require changes in operations that, if well executed, are hypothesized to increase student outcomes like student learning and student achievement (Duke, 2015). At its core, a SIP has roots in the rational-organizational paradigm, which centers on improving organizational processes and operations to, in turn, improve outcomes of interest (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

The details of SIPs—like their design, required contents, and level of detail—can vary greatly (Mintrop et al., 2001; VanGronigen et al., 2023). No one SIP template should be considered best or correct, but it likely should be nuanced enough for school leaders to be comprehensive, but contextually responsive, to adequately address pressing challenges in their schools (Duke et al., 2013; VanGronigen et al., 2023). These challenges can sometimes be complex and compete with one another, so a robust understanding of different details of SIPs is necessary for school leaders to help identify the most important challenges, determine appropriate responses to address them, monitor progress, and appropriately adjust as the school year progresses (Duke, 2015).

2.2. The Roles of Policy and High-Stakes Accountability Systems on SIPs

Although school improvement planning has been a common exercise for school leaders for decades (Edmonds, 1979; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2016), the concept of a formalized SIP is relatively newer. In many Western countries, SIPs have emerged alongside of, and perhaps in response to, school accountability systems (Broadhead et al., 1998; McNamara et al., 2002; Mintrop et al., 2001).

Accountability system- and policy-related expectations (e.g., narrow priorities, reporting mechanisms, etc.) can have paradoxical influences on how school leaders conceptualize, develop, and implement SIPs. On one hand, these expectations explicitly communicate what matters in terms of school performance, such as student achievement or graduation rates (Aaron et al., 2024; Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002). Yet, as a result, SIPs can sometimes be unrealistically comprehensive, overloaded with actions, and full of regulatory-responsive minutiae rather than being “focused and strategic” (Mintrop et al., 2001, p. 200). Thus, on the other hand, the very school improvement effort(s) that SIPs are supposed to be developed to support can instead reduce school leaders’ authentic engagement in the process and prompt them to engage with SIPs more so out of compliance and obligation (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Complementary articles from a study approximately 25 years ago demonstrated how SIP contents reflected policy expectations (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Mintrop et al., 2001), suggesting that school leaders perceived high-quality and successful SIPs to be policy responsive, but not necessarily responsive to their schools’ unique contexts. Studies conducted since then indicate that little in this particular regard has changed (Aaron et al., 2024; Strunk et al., 2016).

2.3. The Influence of SIPs on Organizational and Student Outcomes

The limited evidence of SIP influence on organizational and student outcomes is mixed. Some evidence suggests that higher-quality SIPs correlate with better organizational outcomes, such as school climate and instructional quality (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Strunk et al., 2016). Yet, the implementation of SIPs, even high-quality ones, sometimes diminishes over time (Strunk et al., 2016).

Evidence also exists on the relationships between SIP quality and student outcomes, particularly student achievement. Higher-quality SIPs have been found to positively associate with higher levels of student reading and mathematics achievement, even after controlling for various student demographic and school organizational variables (Fernandez, 2011; Huber & Conway, 2015). The strength of those relationships, however, can diminish over time (Strunk et al., 2016). Yet, only a few studies have shown a relationship (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2022). More sophisticated research designed to demonstrate causation—that better SIPs result in increased student test scores—has not been as positive. Indeed, there is little evidence that SIPs cause increases in student achievement (Huber & Conway, 2015; Lockheed et al., 2010; Strunk et al., 2016), although Fernandez (2011) did find that SIP quality was a predictor of student achievement. Fernandez did caution, though, that the result could be misleading because better school leaders might be more skilled at writing high-quality SIPs. If such is the case, SIP quality would instead be a proxy for school leader quality.

Based on this evidence, any current assessment about the value of SIPs based on these evaluations seems misguided. As this review later shows, the development, implementation, monitoring, and adjustment of SIPs are parts of a complex process (Duke, 2015). Routinely, school leaders have not been adequately prepared to lead nearly any of those parts of the process (Bickmore et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, overall SIP quality appears to be low (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Strunk et al., 2016; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020). Further, educational systems are often designed to inhibit school leaders from addressing their

organizations' most important issues (Aaron et al., 2024; Strunk et al., 2016). Because of these and other challenges, school leaders regularly engage in satisficing behaviors that result in them submitting SIPs to authorities that are good enough to receive approvals but not necessarily good enough to be optimal drivers of meaningful change and improvement in their schools (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019, 2021). In such cases, school leaders can leverage SIPs as signals of an adherence to acceptable models of reform without necessarily engaging in complex change efforts (Narayanan & McCluskey, 2025). Thus, a more complete understanding of SIPs and the processes necessary to develop, implement, and monitor high-quality SIPs seem imperative given how much human and political capital go into their development.

3. Materials and Methods

From our understanding of the research literature, the formalization of SIPs as part of the rise in school accountability systems began in some Western countries in the 1990s and early 2000s (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Mintrop et al., 2001). Much of the research inclusive of SIPs in those first years focused on the ways in which SIPs were responsive to policy initiatives (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Mintrop et al., 2001). In addition, SIP-related research in non-Western countries was sparse through the early 2000s. Thus, we decided to retrieve any peer-reviewed journal article focused on SIPs and published from 2010 through 2025.

We conducted searches for "school improvement plan," "school development plan," and "school strategic plan" in university search engines (e.g., EBSCOHost) as well as Google Scholar. We also reviewed reference lists at the end of relevant articles. We continued to search and review until reaching saturation. It is worth noting that these terms can mean different things depending on context, as well as language. In response, we considered only research articles published in English. We also prioritized articles on empirical research that focused on plans designed for school improvement. Yet, we did not assess the quality of the research studies reported in the articles, primarily to ensure representative inclusion from countries where researchers might have—for example—fewer resources or less access to research sites. We excluded articles that included SIPs as part of more robust studies of school improvement efforts because, in all of the examples we reviewed, little detail specific to SIP development or implementation was provided. In total, our inclusion and exclusion criteria produced a dataset of 62 peer-reviewed journal articles. Of them, five were dropped from consideration because they focused on aspects other than SIP development or implementation (e.g., Fernandez's (2011) evaluation of SIP quality and student achievement outcomes). Thus, the final systematic review dataset included 57 peer-reviewed journal articles.

When analyzing the findings from these articles, we focused on what is known about SIP development and processes. That is, we were less interested in learning about SIP quality or influence because, as noted above, such a focus would prioritize results (i.e., did test scores increase?) without understanding (i.e., for what reasons did test scores increase or not?). Given the intuitive appeal of planning processes and improvement plans across organizational improvement efforts generally (e.g., a focus on improving literacy instruction to increase reading scores on national assessments), our priority was to understand and report out what is known about the contents of SIPs as well as doing SIP-related work. The findings from a study of SIP template content across U.S. states resulted in the designation of six distinct (but related and relatively linear) areas of SIP-related development and processes: assessing current conditions, determining needs, setting direction, organizing resources, taking action, and evaluating progress (VanGronigen et al., 2023). These areas

do not rise to the level of a conceptual framework but instead offer a practical way—or organizing tool—to understand SIP development and implementation.

To help set context for the findings, we provide a brief overview of the 57 articles in our dataset. Specifically, the study settings within the 57 articles spanned 15 countries (see Table A1 in Appendix A). Studies in the U.S. were most represented with 22, followed by Kenya and the Philippines with seven each. Multiple studies were also conducted in Jamaica, Nigeria, Portugal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Turkey. It is also worth noting that articles were published relatively evenly from 2010 through 2025. If the timeline is considered in thirds, 19 were published from 2010 through 2015, 16 from 2016 through 2020, and 22 from 2021 through 2025. Although articles with studies set in the U.S. span the entire timeline, there does appear to be groupings in publications by year and study settings. For example, all seven studies set in Kenya were published from 2012 through 2015, and all seven studies set in the Philippines were published from 2020 through 2025. Similar patterns are seen when research in multiple articles was conducted in the same country. Table A1 also shows that across the six areas used to organize this research review, we found evidence in the following number of studies per area: 31 in assessing current conditions, 33 in determining needs, 41 in setting direction, 20 in organizing resources, 33 in taking action, and 21 in evaluating progress.

To determine if an area was identifiable in a study, we reviewed the findings from each of the 57 articles in the same way a researcher would read and code transcribed interview data, performing essentially a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to identify patterns and themes related to the six areas of our organizing tool. We coded article findings based on area, although some findings were relevant to multiple areas and, thus, were coded multiple times. Once all articles were coded, we reread our codes for each area and, for some areas, created subareas to increase the nuance of our reporting. We developed subareas because the same area could be understood as SIP development or SIP process. For example, in some studies, assessing current conditions focused on how current conditions were reported in SIPs as part of the SIP development. In other studies, however, researchers reported on how current conditions influenced the process of developing SIPs. For each area and subarea, we wrote the forthcoming findings section by building content from the smallest coding units (e.g., words, phrases) to the largest (e.g., paragraphs, sections) to maintain attention to nuance.

Before turning to results, we highlight some important methodological limitations. First, although this review is of research on SIPs from around the world, readers should recognize that international representativeness is uneven. Kenya, the Philippines, and the U.S. comprise 36 of the 57 (63%) studies reviewed. In addition, English is an official language of most countries studied for this review. Further, it is possible that, in some contexts, SIPs exist in language or nomenclature we did not recognize. Second, as noted above, we elected to include peer-reviewed empirical research without a critical lens on the quality of the research, as the quality of the research can be uneven. Instead, we posit that this review provides a substantial landscape of a burgeoning body of research on SIP development and implementation.

4. Results

In this section, we report on each area in the order most aligned with SIP development and processes. Although SIP-related work should likely be iterative and rely on feedback loops to inform continuous improvement, it generally begins with an assessment of current conditions that leads to a determination of a school's needs. Once needs are determined, the process moves to setting direction that subsequently requires organizing resources and taking action. The typical last stage of the process focuses on evaluating progress as actions are taken.

4.1. Area 1 of 6—Assessing Current Conditions

Caputo and Rastelli (2014) identified contextual details within SIPs in Italy as a distinct category with high levels of lexical richness and variety. In a review of SIP templates across U.S. states, VanGronigen et al. (2023) determined that nearly one quarter of template prompts focused on current conditions. The conditions in which schools exist and operate undoubtedly influence the content, quality, and implementation of their SIPs (Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). The research literature presents these current conditions in two ways: (a) how conditions influence the development of SIPs, and (b) how conditions are discussed within SIPs to explain context.

4.1.1. Conditions Influencing the Development of SIPs

Policy and governing entities regularly establish guidance and set expectations for SIP development and contents. SIP-related templates created by governing entities commonly inform and guide how school leaders develop SIPs (Dunaway et al., 2014; VanGronigen et al., 2023). These entities also frequently supply schools with goals that are expected to be incorporated into SIPs (Dunaway et al., 2012, 2014; Kyalo & Gichinga, 2014; Mutia, 2025; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020; Njeru et al., 2013; Simon & Black, 2011). In countries with high-stakes accountability systems, for example, student achievement—typically in the form of student test scores—is pervasive (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). This relatively narrow focus prompts school leaders to align SIP contents with improving student achievement, sometimes at the expense of other important issues in their schools (Aaron et al., 2024; Lockheed et al., 2010). Indeed, this kind of top-down approach can inform SIP contents and be an imposition on school leaders (Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). However, in countries without high-stakes accountability systems, evidence suggests that some school leaders are relatively uninformed of planning policies (Kiprop & Kanyiri, 2012). Further, in those contexts, there can be limited oversight of SIP development, content, and resulting quality (Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016).

Even in contexts where policy expectations are less focused on SIP development and content, organizational history can influence who develops SIPs and what SIPs prioritize (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012; Balindong et al., 2024; Carvalho et al., 2023). Organizational beliefs and values can inform SIP processes and influence how priorities are determined (Dunaway et al., 2012). In some places, for instance, there is little local commitment to developing SIPs, so SIPs remain undeveloped (Sang et al., 2015). In other places, traditional role expectations matter, even if that results in unprepared school leaders overseeing SIP development despite not having the requisite knowledge and skills to do so (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014).

Turning to educator motivation with respect to SIPs, many teachers indicate low levels of motivation to advance SIP priorities and actions (Dunaway et al., 2014; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). Numerous teachers believe that SIPs have little positive influence on student learning (Dunaway et al., 2014). Thus, teachers have little incentive to overcome some of the following challenges in order to focus on SIPs: having a limited understanding of the SIP process, the distance they live from their school and a related lack of transportation to be able to attend SIP-related meetings outside the typical school day, larger time commitments than many may be able or want to do, competing responsibilities with their teaching, and inadequate pay generally and to participate in SIP-related work specifically (Francis, 2024).

Although often more positive about SIPs than teachers, some school leaders concede that SIPs are not inherently motivating (Dunaway et al., 2014; Lingam et al., 2014). The extent to which and the ways in which school leaders are supported and prepared to lead SIP-related work varies within and across contexts (Meyer et al., 2020; Njeru et al., 2013). Many

school leaders have not been adequately prepared to understand how SIPs can be effectively leveraged or how to develop, much less implement and monitor, high-quality SIPs (Francis, 2024; Kiprop & Kanyiri, 2012; Lingam et al., 2014; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016).

If SIPs are intended to be collectively owned by school leaders, teachers, and others to drive organizational change, the lack of inclusion of stakeholders other than school leaders may undermine the work. The extent to which teachers and others—like parents and other community stakeholders—are included as collaborators to develop SIPs varies considerably. Teachers can be heavily involved in SIP processes (Yıkıcı & Altınay, 2017), but their level of involvement can depend on national and local contexts, as well as historical approaches to planning processes within schools (Carvalho et al., 2021, 2023; Demir et al., 2019; Dunaway et al., 2012, 2014; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020). Yet, teacher involvement in SIP-related work has been associated with higher-quality SIPs (Thompson, 2018). On the other hand, few studies identify parents or other community stakeholders as contributors to SIP-related work. If considered, parents or others remain relatively peripheral to SIPs (Bentayao et al., 2024; Myende & Bhengu, 2015; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020) despite their potential abilities to enhance SIP development (Wronowski et al., 2022).

4.1.2. Conditions Identified in SIPs as Critical Context

Despite research suggesting that current conditions and context are prevalently featured in SIP templates and contents (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; VanGronigen et al., 2023), there is surprisingly little description of those current conditions and context in SIPs. Of what is described, family background and other social contexts are frequently noted to describe who the school enrolls and how associated factors might affect student outcomes (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Dunaway et al., 2014; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020). The particulars vary by context, but student race, immigration status, and poverty levels are commonly detailed factors (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012; Caputo & Rastelli, 2014). Broader community issues such as levels of neighborhood violence, unemployment, and poverty are also sometimes included (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014). In some contexts, external agencies that work closely with schools (e.g., social services) or are important to adolescent development outside of school (e.g., religious institutions) can be discussed at length, especially in the context of partnerships (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014). Yet, for many schools, inadequate facilities and/or substandard infrastructures loom over SIP development (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012; Bentayao et al., 2024).

4.2. Area 2 of 6—Determining Needs

Among other things, a SIP is an “important tool for finding areas for improvement” (Balindong et al., 2024, p. 166). Indeed, once current conditions are assessed, the work turns to determining a school’s needs based on those conditions. This section reports findings on who determines needs, how needs are determined, and what needs are typically identified in SIPs.

4.2.1. Who Determines School Needs Identified in SIPs?

Because school leaders oversee the building and the people most likely to have some formal training on planning (Bickmore et al., 2021), they are most typically responsible for determining needs (Demir et al., 2019). Compared to other stakeholders, school leaders tend to have ready access to important information and data (Craus et al., 2023) like student suspension rates, attendance rates, and mental health statuses (Demir et al., 2019). School leaders are also primed to strategically invite teachers and other stakeholders into the process of determining needs (Nicdao & Ancho, 2020), although some evidence suggests that school leaders—rather than others—take on much of this SIP-related work in relative isolation (Craus et al., 2023; Meyers et al., 2023).

Expertise external to a school can inform SIP contents. Educational leaders that supervise, manage, or coach school leaders—such as school district assistant superintendents in the U.S.—can help to ensure that SIP contents align with the priorities and, perhaps, templates of governing entities (Aaron et al., 2024; Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014). Site-based management committees or similar structures may also help school leaders determine needs because they have experience in and/or knowledge of local and institutional histories (Ezeugbor & Onedigbo, 2019; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). Less commonly, school leaders might invite experts, such as third-party consultants, to analyze data or to lead a needs-sensing process with SIP developers (Aaron et al., 2024; Demir et al., 2019).

When encouraged and incentivized to participate, teachers can leverage their institutional knowledge to help determine needs (Craus et al., 2023). However, their inclusion at this stage of SIP development is uneven, ranging from almost no involvement (Isernhagen, 2012; Lingam et al., 2014) to high involvement (Kyalo & Gichinga, 2014; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020; Yikici & Altinay, 2017). The perceived ability of teachers to make meaningful contributions to determining their school's needs, especially those perceptions held by their school leaders, seems to be an important factor regarding their level of involvement (Lingam et al., 2014; Yikici & Altinay, 2017). Outside of those working in schools, research suggests that parents can also be effective partners in determining needs in some situations (Craus et al., 2023; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020).

4.2.2. How Are School Needs in SIPs Determined?

Governing entities often establish parameters that can heavily influence how a school's needs are locally determined (Chukwumah, 2015; Yikici & Altinay, 2017). For example, in the U.S., state education agencies develop SIP templates that regularly require the following: student test score data, steps to advance educator professional learning, and school-level goals aimed at improving students' social-emotional learning (Marianno et al., 2024; VanGronigen et al., 2023). Significant policy changes can also influence how needs are determined for SIPs. For example, a new national curriculum in Jamaica resulted in many SIPs prioritizing learning to implement that curriculum versus focusing more on schools' unique needs (Lockheed et al., 2010). External agencies or experts might also make suggestions that school leaders adopt as school needs and that become SIP priorities (Ezeugbor & Onedigbo, 2019; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017).

Research suggests that there is considerably more to learn about how school leaders can be best developed and positioned to lead work determining school needs. Specifically, from complementary studies, Meyers and VanGronigen (2019, 2021) found that school leaders often engaged in satisficing behavior in which they did just enough needs determining work to submit SIPs that were acceptable to governing entities that approved SIPs, such as state education agencies. Satisficing behavior includes (a) focusing mostly on student test scores to the detriment of developing a more comprehensive understanding of school needs, (b) submitting the same basic SIP across different reporting cycles (i.e., the SIP is never updated), and (c) identifying possible root causes of needs that are ultimately unrelated to priorities described in SIPs. In fact, root cause analyses, which are part of the needs determination area, were consistently scored between beginning and developing levels of quality in various studies that assessed SIP quality (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2021; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020).

Across numerous studies, school needs are primarily determined by data analysis. Data are important to determine needs and defend decisions (Gonzales et al., 2022). Student test scores are frequently reviewed to demonstrate current conditions related to low academic performance (Aaron et al., 2024; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017) across the school or

by select student subgroups (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Carvalho et al., 2022; Simon & Black, 2011). Often using end-of-course test results (Dunaway et al., 2012), students' mathematics and literacy/language achievement are most commonly identified as high-needs content areas followed by other areas like science (Bickmore et al., 2021; Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Simon & Black, 2011; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017, 2022). Reliance on student test score data, however, can result in SIPs with a narrow focus that could hinder deeper, more nuanced dives into school needs that are critical to address, such as student well-being (Balindong et al., 2024; Mutia, 2025; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017).

School leaders sometimes prioritize other types of student data besides test scores to determine school needs. Some SIPs include data on student behavior and discipline (Bickmore et al., 2021; Carvalho et al., 2022; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Other SIPs center on student participation and motivation to learn (Bickmore et al., 2021; Carvalho et al., 2022). Still others identify issues related to student belonging and connections with their schools (Bickmore et al., 2021; Carvalho et al., 2022).

In some schools, processes to determine needs focused on adult behaviors and other adult-related factors can be especially meaningful instead of just a narrower focus on student test scores (Huber & Conway, 2015). Most commonly, inadequate instructional practices and pedagogy are identified as key needs to address (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Carvalho et al., 2022; Coker, 2022; Khanam et al., 2023; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Other common needs include a lack of teacher collaboration and motivation, as well as teacher absenteeism (Carvalho et al., 2022). The lack of intentional inclusion of community stakeholders (Khanam et al., 2023) along with the need to create or update curriculum (Coker, 2022; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017), are also prevalent needs across the literature. In some contexts, though, inadequate school facilities are identified as a school's most urgent need (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012).

4.3. Area 3 of 6—Setting Direction

Setting direction—meaning what a SIP should focus on—seems to be the area that has garnered the most attention in terms of SIP templates and related guidance (e.g., resource toolkits) as well as research (VanGronigen et al., 2023). This section considers who engages in setting direction and what direction they emphasize.

4.3.1. Who Engages in Setting Direction?

School leaders are the primary drivers of setting direction. Their role or title often designates them as being responsible for establishing a school's purpose, which a SIP can help facilitate (Aaron et al., 2024; Balindong et al., 2024; Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). School leaders are better positioned to determine and connect SIP content (e.g., vision to goals to actions) (Craus et al., 2023). Yet, training for school leaders to learn how to set direction through SIPs can be ineffectual (Dabesa & Cheramlak, 2021; Gonzales et al., 2022). Even without adequate formal training, school leaders realize that SIPs can help to set their school's general direction (Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016).

Setting direction in and through SIPs is frequently understood as a collective or team effort (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012) that requires coherence (Aaron et al., 2024). In one study, school leaders described the setting direction process to be inclusive of all faculty and staff and centered on values and beliefs (Dunaway et al., 2012). To formalize the process, governing entity leaders and/or school leaders regularly establish a school building leadership team that is responsible for SIP development (Dunaway et al., 2014; Gonzales et al., 2022; Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). More equitable representation on this team and in SIP-related work more generally can establish a wider spirit of collaboration and a sense of unity among faculty and staff (Khanam et al., 2023).

Teachers consistently perceive themselves to be significant contributors to setting direction in SIPs (Carvalho et al., 2021, 2023). Those teachers with more expertise and leadership experience tend to be more involved in setting direction than their less-expert and -experienced colleagues (Carvalho et al., 2021). Teachers' involvement in setting direction seems to increase their feeling of ownership in the SIP process, which holds promise for the wider implementation of a SIP during a school year (Carvalho et al., 2021). Yet, in many cases, teachers view SIPs more as a mandated task to complete, which can reduce teachers' commitment to setting direction and subsequently to implementing the SIP (Bas & Korkmaz, 2017). In less motivating scenarios, teachers are assigned to SIP-related committees based on teachers' availability, motivation, and expertise, which may not align with their interest, ability, or capacity (Dunaway et al., 2012; Ezeugbor & Onedigbo, 2019; Francis, 2024).

Other stakeholders are also sometimes involved in setting direction (Carvalho et al., 2023; Myende & Bhengu, 2015). The call to include parents, for example, is often reported as high (Craus et al., 2023), although parents' actual inclusion in helping set direction seems limited both in participation and responsibilities (Dunaway et al., 2012, 2014; Wronowski et al., 2022). In certain contexts, policy may dictate that various stakeholders, including community leaders, parents, and students, be included in setting direction (Nicdao & Ancho, 2020; Yikici & Altinay, 2017). There is some evidence, though, that involvement does not guarantee understanding or actual investment in and influence over setting direction (Myende & Bhengu, 2015; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016; Strunk et al., 2016). Regardless of whom is involved, the setting-direction area can be disjointed when key stakeholders are excluded (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014).

4.3.2. What Is Included in Setting Direction?

School vision and mission seem to be the drivers to set direction in SIPs (Aaron et al., 2024; Chukwumah, 2015; Gonzales et al., 2022; Kyalo & Gichinga, 2014). School leaders view their school's vision and mission as essential (Balkar & Kalman, 2018), representative of core values (Craus et al., 2023), and necessary for helping plan for the future (Khanam et al., 2023). Vision and mission represent ideal states upon which everyone can, in theory, agree (Balkar & Kalman, 2018; Myende & Bhengu, 2015). Vision statements in SIPs, in particular, also seem typically clear (Agi, 2017) and stable from year to year (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017), but they are not always compelling (Aaron et al., 2024; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020). In some instances, school leaders can struggle to describe their school's vision, which hampers its meaningful incorporation into a SIP (Aaron et al., 2024). Moreover, teachers sometimes understand the vision differently than school leaders (Khanam et al., 2023). Too frequently, though, many vision statements are narrow restatements about the importance of increasing student test scores—and not much else (Aaron et al., 2024; Simon & Black, 2011).

School vision and mission statements are often intended to be translated into strategic priorities and/or goals that also become parts of SIPs (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012). Some evidence indicates that SIP priorities and goals focused on student needs can be positively correlated with improved student outcomes (Huber & Conway, 2015). Thus, SIP research includes a noticeable focus on a SIP's priorities and goals (Aaron et al., 2024), which have been found to cluster on increasing student achievement, improving student learning, and training teachers (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014). Some studies assert that SIP priorities and goals should be clearly stated and limited to just a few to maintain focus (Meyers et al., 2023; Mutia, 2025; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020). Otherwise, SIPs can become incoherent or lose their potential potency as a tool for planning and implementing improvement efforts (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

Governing entities regularly influence SIP goals (Dunaway et al., 2014; Marianno et al., 2024), potentially constraining goal selection when curriculum or other educational aspects

are—by policy—supposed to be uniform across schools (Kyalo & Gichinga, 2014; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020). Such a centralized approach, though, can suggest that school leaders are unprepared to effectively choose priorities and goals on their own, so governing entities need to do the work for these leaders (Marianno et al., 2024; Njeru et al., 2013). Whether priorities and goals set by governing entities can consistently influence organizational practice, however, remains an open question because school leaders and teachers do not always see alignment between various levels, such as the state and their school or their district and their school (Carvalho et al., 2022). Collective voice and commitment from various stakeholders seem important to garner buy in, encourage collaboration, and advance from SIP development to SIP implementation (Balkar & Kalman, 2018). Teams doing SIP-related work are important at this stage so that they can begin translating priorities and goals into actions and determining logistics like budgeting and time necessary to implement those actions to achieve those priorities and goals (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012).

Somewhat surprisingly, few studies suggested that the work of setting direction clearly mapped onto the work to determine needs (Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Mutia, 2025; Yıkıcı & Altınay, 2017). For example, in Bickmore and colleagues' (Bickmore et al., 2021) study of U.S. principal preparation training, aspiring principals consistently positioned goals and actions as responses to what they found in their needs sensing work. It is conceivable to formalize a process that requires connecting goals to identified needs (Nicdao & Ancho, 2020), although such explicitness appears to be uncommon. On the whole, however, it is possible that many of the directions set in SIPs do not directly connect to the results of root cause analyses, meaning that schools implement actions that do not help address important needs (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2021). In some cases, leaders and teachers might resist setting a new direction because they do not want to change much about what they currently do (Kiprop & Kanyiri, 2012).

4.4. Area 4 of 6—Organizing Resources

Of the six SIP areas, VanGronigen et al. (2023) found that organizing resources was least featured in SIP templates. Our review of the literature further supports this finding. The thin body of research on organizing resources and SIPs highlights four significant aspects: time, support, facilities, and finances.

Time is reported in two ways. The first way is about the time necessary for developing an implementable SIP (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012). The second way is about how time is planned within the SIP. A history of poor time management within schools can complicate SIP implementation planning (Kiprop & Kanyiri, 2012). Insufficient staffing can require faculty and staff to take on too many responsibilities, reducing their available time to develop and implement aspects of the SIP, such as needs sensing (Coker, 2022). Differences in a SIP's time horizon—meaning how much of a school year the SIP is supposed to address (e.g., 90 days, one school year, five school years)—also require school leaders to be adaptive (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014). Despite the importance of time in SIPs, at least one study shows that it is often neglected and surprisingly often unconsidered (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

With regard to support, some SIPs identify strategic partners to ensure the implementation of the actions intended to meet SIP goals (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012). Depending on circumstances, strategic partners might include district leaders like principal supervisors or other managerial personnel above the school level who can support school leaders in implementing the SIP (Aaron et al., 2024; Meyers et al., 2023). Such support is especially necessary in contexts where school leaders lack authority to advance improvement initiatives (Balkar & Kalman, 2018) or lack adequate preparation to develop and enact SIPs (Carvalho et al., 2023). Moreover, protection from political interference can be critical to advancing SIP development and implementation in some circumstances (Chemwei et al., 2014). Programs

and special funding can sometimes be leveraged to access books, materials, and other resources that require school leaders to include such programs in SIPs to make full use of any assets (Lockheed et al., 2010). Too frequently, however, funding is delayed and/or incomplete (Aaron et al., 2024; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016), which can result in a lack of even the most basic learning materials (Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). Yet, inadequate human resources (e.g., too few teachers) might be the most substantial impediment to SIP implementation (Chemwei et al., 2014).

Many schools identified for needing improvement lack sufficient facilities (Balkar & Kalman, 2018). In one study, researchers determined that approximately 70% of schools had inadequate facilities, including classrooms and libraries (Kiprop & Kanyiri, 2012). Another study also identified insufficient laboratories and current technology (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014). School sanitation can also be a significant challenge (Kiprop & Kanyiri, 2012). Some schools need renovations (Balindong et al., 2024), which can divert resources from improvement initiatives. Sang and colleagues (Sang et al., 2015) pointed out that some SIPs in Kenya prioritized “infrastructure development” (p. 6) because facilities were needed first before SIPs could focus on student learning. Thus, for some schools around the world, “the budget and physical facilities determine the goals of planning” (Yıkıcı & Altınay, 2017, p. 36).

Financing can introduce many complexities in SIP-related work. Even just understanding how and then having the discipline to execute a budget can be challenging for some school leaders (Balkar & Kalman, 2018). Moreover, budgeting is a school leader responsibility not typically shared with others, such as assistant principals (Francis, 2024). Many schools required to develop SIPs lack necessary funds (Kiprop & Kanyiri, 2012; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016), so determining what actions can be planned and actually implemented necessitates linking SIP goals and priorities with financial resources (Balindong et al., 2024; Chemwei et al., 2014; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020). Inconsistencies and delays in funding can make accurately developing SIPs a challenge because it is difficult to predict what improvement initiatives can actually be afforded (Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). In extreme situations, “these plans stay in the air without cash resource[s]” (Balkar & Kalman, 2018, p. 49) because there are only enough funds to keep the school operational. In developed countries, injections of funding can be a major benefit for short-term improvement but require long-term strategizing because such injections are typically available for only a short period of time (Isernhagen, 2012). Similarly, finances, budgeting, and timelines are interconnected, meaning some SIP actions may be delayed until funding is secured (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014). Still, some evidence suggests few school leaders authentically engage with financial implications in their SIPs, regularly making vague references to resource allocations in SIPs or never mentioning resources at all (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

4.5. Area 5 of 6—Taking Action

SIP templates almost always feature a way to list actions (Aaron et al., 2024; VanGronigen et al., 2023), but template designs can limit the number and depth of actions included (VanGronigen et al., 2023). In this section, we consider taking action in two ways: planning actions and then implementing those planned actions.

4.5.1. Planning Actions

There is general agreement in schools to determine actions in SIPs to guide improvement initiatives (Aaron et al., 2024; Meyers et al., 2023; Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Strunk et al., 2016). For actions to be meaningful, though, they should reflect nuanced, aligned work that is tailored to a school’s current conditions and needs (Balindong et al., 2024). Moreover, explicit actions are more likely to be implemented (Carvalho et al., 2022).

However, research suggests that actions regularly lack nuance and are too generic and unspecific to be practically useful (Coker, 2022). Many actions seem unmoored from school vision and mission and SIP priorities and goals (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014). Actions designed to advance new initiatives (Lockheed et al., 2010) and/or multiple improvement strategies (Bickmore et al., 2021) can be laced with challenges. Thus, there is a hard-to-define balance regarding the number of actions to include: too few do not provide enough direction while too many can overwhelm those charged with implementing SIPs (Balindong et al., 2024; Bickmore et al., 2021; Coker, 2022).

School leaders are typically viewed as responsible for planning actions. They can leverage actions in SIPs to inspire change by connecting together such actions to needs, vision, mission, and stakeholder perspectives (Khanam et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2020). Unfortunately, when school leaders include others in the process of planning actions, the process can feel fragmented, as actions are commonly planned in isolation rather than with a committee or team (e.g., a principal focusing solely on budget, an assistant principal focusing solely on discipline, etc.) (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014).

Teacher involvement is necessary to help navigate many of the tensions identified above. Teachers can add insight into aspects like how actions connect to one another or how many actions are reasonable (Balindong et al., 2024; Carvalho et al., 2022; Wronowski et al., 2022). Teachers believe themselves to have more insight and responsibility than other stakeholders to identify (and implement) actions that can result in positive change (Carvalho et al., 2021, 2023). But for reasons identified in previous sections, their participation in developing actions for SIPs can be limited (Carvalho et al., 2023; Francis, 2024). It is worth noting that—in some places—research suggests that establishing teams and involving communities in planning actions are parts of the SIP development process, although associated details are sparse (Francis, 2024; Lesilwa & Nihuka, 2024). Also, participants might not even realize if or how they are contributing to the planning of actions (Myende & Bhengu, 2015).

4.5.2. Implementing Planned Actions

Rates of SIP implementation are open for interpretation. Binary or simplistic approaches to assess whether SIPs have been implemented might inflate results (Sang et al., 2015). Reviewing SIPs over time, Meyers et al. (2023) found that SIP actions were updated in ways to suggest initial actions had been implemented, but school leaders could offer little explanation about how they knew actions had been implemented. In that vein, Dacan and Pacadaljen (2020) found in their study that about 70% of Filipino schools implemented SIP actions at least at a moderate level. These and other studies (e.g., Strunk et al., 2016) suggest that actions identified in SIPs typically are marked as implemented. Some school leaders astutely raised the question: Should action implementation progress be determined by quantity (i.e., the number of actions implemented) or quality (i.e., how well actions were implemented) (Meyers et al., 2023)? Regardless, it seems that better implementation sections of SIPs are related to the “greater ease of implementation” (Strunk et al., 2016, p. 292), meaning that SIPs with easy-to-implement actions are more likely to be implemented.

When school leaders see the development of SIPs as a compliance activity, lower levels of implementation follow (Aaron et al., 2024; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). Too often, action for the sake of action is elevated over the value of actions (Coker, 2022). Moreover, sometimes actions seem to be nothing more than “a continuation of the status quo repackaged” (Coker, 2022, p. 85), leaving SIP implementation “highly practiced” (Decena & Galarosa, 2024, p. 70). Higher levels of SIP implementation appear to rely on actions that are part of a broader systematic plan (Khanam et al., 2023) and that relate to and/or build upon one another in logical ways (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020).

SIP implementation often necessitates the clear, widespread communication of SIP actions and their value to garner faculty, staff, parent, and other stakeholder commitment (Balindong et al., 2024; Carvalho et al., 2021; Khanam et al., 2023; Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). There is a semblance of streamlining implementation because everyone has a sense of being collectively responsible (Craus et al., 2023). When school leaders build collective commitment with faculty and staff, school leaders believe that actions are implemented more effectively (Gonzales et al., 2022; Khanam et al., 2023). School leaders can also leverage collaborative working conditions necessary to implement a SIP (Khanam et al., 2023; Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). However, in many situations, school leaders and teachers report weak levels of collaboration and, subsequently, lower levels of SIP implementation (Dabesa & Cheramlak, 2021).

Teachers regularly view themselves as the central actors to implement SIPs (Carvalho et al., 2021). Many SIP actions require teachers to make changes in their classroom practices (Demir et al., 2019; Khanam et al., 2023). The more embedded teachers are in SIP development, the more willing they seem to be to implement actions in SIPs (Carvalho et al., 2023; Lesilwa & Nihuka, 2024). In a similar vein, there is some positive correlational evidence between more frequent communication about SIP content and SIP implementation levels (Kyalo & Gichinga, 2014). The sheer number of substantial actions that teachers are supposed to implement, especially related to instructional improvement, can be daunting (Coker, 2022). Assistance for teachers to implement instructional changes seems too often to be peripheral or missing from SIPs (Demir et al., 2019; Dunaway et al., 2014).

Centralizing elements (e.g., strong policies, operational manuals and guides, etc.) potentially increase the likelihood of implementing actions (Kyalo & Gichinga, 2014; Lockheed et al., 2010). For example, Mutia (2025) illustrates how schools in their study generally had high levels of SIP implementation, at least for those actions in SIPs that were directly responsive to a national-level policy mandate. Top-down approaches can sometimes result in policy or program implementation more so than SIP-driven actions (Simon & Black, 2011). Short-cycle SIPs designed for one semester or less might result in increased levels of implementation because the actions for one short-cycle SIP drive decisions for subsequent short-cycle SIPs (Aaron et al., 2024). In this sense, a SIP can be seen as a “living document” (Aaron et al., 2024, p. 1529) that is used and refined throughout a school year.

4.6. Area 6 of 6—Evaluating Progress

School leaders regularly indicate that SIPs must have some kind of targets to provide direction to achieve goals (Aaron et al., 2024). However, templates or other guiding documents might place less emphasis on evaluating SIP implementation progress (VanGronigen et al., 2023) because they do not always distinguish between evaluating progress towards outcomes and outcomes themselves (Decena & Galarosa, 2024). In this section, we report on monitoring processes and monitoring outcomes—to the extent that current literature permits us to do—as distinct elements of SIP-related work.

4.6.1. Monitoring Processes

When the monitoring of SIP actions is thoughtfully planned, various stakeholders are included—and programs, projects, and initiatives can be revised during SIP implementation to improve effectiveness (Aaron et al., 2024; Decena & Galarosa, 2024). Successful monitoring, though, requires a commitment to collecting and using appropriate data (Decena & Galarosa, 2024; Demir et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2020; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020). In a series of studies in Portugal, for example, researchers reported that SIP monitoring referred to objectives, indicators, and instruments as ways to establish—in advance—a robust way for school leaders to measure if a SIP was being implemented successfully (Carvalho et al.,

2022, 2023). Moreover, within-school year and between-school year adjustments to SIPs demonstrate a commitment to organizational improvement, as data from one SIP are being used to develop other SIPs (Decena & Galarosa, 2024).

Progress towards meeting SIP goals should be monitored (and thus measured) regularly, but also discussed and adjusted based on results of such monitoring and measuring (Nicdao & Ancho, 2020). In one study, successful SIP implementation depended on goals that were measured, discussed monthly or quarterly, and adjusted during the school year (Dunaway et al., 2012). In another study, progress monitoring in successful schools occurred at least bi-weekly and was “the main vehicle for holding different members of the school accountable and for having conversations about what to do in response to the data” (Meyer et al., 2020, p. 373). Ongoing communication to various stakeholders about how and why SIPs are being updated is a critical piece of the monitoring process (Aaron et al., 2024; Nicdao & Ancho, 2020). Thus, progress monitoring is, at its core, a proactive activity (Decena & Galarosa, 2024).

State programs or initiatives can guide how school leaders should monitor SIP implementation (Lockheed et al., 2010; Simon & Black, 2011). Supervisors, coaches, and/or others must sometimes assist school leaders with how to monitor the progress of different actions (Aaron et al., 2024; Van Der Voort & Wood, 2014). Frequent check-ins by governing entities on SIP implementation monitoring processes can be helpful if authentic feedback and coaching are provided by or on behalf of those entities (Dunaway et al., 2014). Sometimes, committees are charged with measuring actions’ implementation to examine if changes are needed within and between school years (Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012).

External oversight and assistance can be important because school leaders often do not sufficiently understand how to monitor SIP implementation (Aaron et al., 2024; Craus et al., 2023). They sometimes monitor SIP implementation through periodic, even infrequent, classroom observations (Aaron et al., 2024). Although classroom observations can be important components of SIP implementation, some evidence suggests that school leaders conduct classroom observations more because they recognize that they are supposed to do so as instructional leaders and not necessarily because such observations align to SIP goals and actions (Craus et al., 2023). This approach can result in school leaders making determinations about SIP implementation based on “gut feeling” (Meyers et al., 2023, p. 854) rather than systematic, rigorous evidence. It is possible that such misalignment can occur due to the pressures school leaders feel in their roles, such as being viewed as instructional leaders responsible for driving teacher improvement but having weak content and/or pedagogical knowledge. Even the most prepared school leaders report having limited time to effectively progress monitor SIPs (Carvalho et al., 2022). In these scenarios, adjustments to SIPs are infrequent and fail to resemble the ‘living documents’ that school leaders and others should regularly update to reflect ongoing learning as SIPs are implemented (Aaron et al., 2024; Meyers et al., 2023). In more dire situations, SIP progress monitoring is not undertaken at all, which results in SIPs that typically go unimplemented or unmonitored (Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016).

Sometimes, challenges beyond school leaders’ responsibilities impede progress monitoring. Unclear or delayed timelines for SIP development and approval can be additional complications. Usually, these complications stem from governing entities that either do not make reporting expectations clear (Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016) or whose review and approval processes delay SIP implementation (Aaron et al., 2024). These issues can make establishing necessary routines to monitor SIPs difficult, especially in under-resourced schools. Thus, some adjustments within and between a school year occur not as a strategic response to what has happened or been learned through SIP-related work, but instead in response to teacher turnover, unexpected changes, or unanticipated organizational barriers

(Strunk et al., 2016). On some occasions, content in SIPs is developed with the belief that a school has the capacity to implement necessary changes, but educators only later realize that adjustments are necessary because other steps must be taken first (e.g., provide teachers with professional learning for a new program before teachers implement that new program) (Aaron et al., 2024; Strunk et al., 2016).

4.6.2. Monitoring Outcomes

Across international contexts, school leaders routinely substitute big-picture goals—primarily increasing student achievement and/or student test scores—for progress monitoring. In other words, there is consistently a disconnect between what SIPs are designed to do (e.g., guide and inform ongoing organizational changes) and what school leaders and others expect SIPs to do (e.g., increase test scores). When the focus of SIP monitoring centers on summative student test scores, the details within SIPs seem less meaningful because those summative scores only come at the end of a school year (Agi, 2017; Bickmore et al., 2021). Relatedly, some schools emphasize benchmark assessments and/or interim assessments as ways to determine if students are making progress on test-based metrics that suggest summative test scores will increase at the end of the school year (Bickmore et al., 2021; Demir et al., 2019). Doing so similarly seems to miss the mark in terms of SIP goals and actions being practically useful because little to nothing is in place to determine if the school, as an organization, is changing during the school year as SIP actions are implemented.

Focusing SIPs on test scores can be problematic for multiple reasons. Among them, adjustments to SIP development and implementation cannot be made in real time because many summative testing efforts do not occur until the end of a school year, which is after considerable SIP implementation (Aaron et al., 2024; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Furthermore, regardless of how student test scores change, if at all, there is little to no way to determine if the SIP development and/or implementation resulted in those changes (Meyers et al., 2023; Strunk et al., 2016). Thus, focusing SIP development almost entirely around student test scores appears to be unhelpful in advancing organizational improvement (Meyers et al., 2023).

Attempting to balance student test scores as priorities with organizational change as actions can be rewarding, but achieving such a balance is not easy (Strunk et al., 2016). Namely, any adjustment to a SIP can be justified as in service of student learning and, in the end, test scores. Instead, more nuanced approaches can prioritize student subgroups (i.e., groups of students with something in common like special education status) so that adjustments to goals or actions can be tailored to those subgroups over time (Meyer et al., 2020; Simon & Black, 2011). In cases where intermediate outcomes (e.g., improving student attendance or increasing teacher instructional capacity) were identified in SIPs with a scaffolded series of actions, participants frequently indicated that professional and organizational adjustments to SIPs over time can be more directly aligned with realizing those outcomes (Carvalho et al., 2023).

5. Discussion

In this review, we have reported on findings from a growing body of international research literature on SIPs since 2010. The six areas—and their order of presentation—that we used to organize this review seem appropriate because the content in most studies, both in researcher presentation and participant data, held similarly linear notions of SIP development and implementation. Further, for a body of international research, the conceptualization, development, and implementation of SIPs seem relatively consistent. School leaders generally believe that SIPs are an important organizing tool that can be leveraged

to determine needs, establish or reinforce vision and mission, and prepare for and implement actions. They also consistently recognize that ongoing progress monitoring is important, whether to evaluate if their improvement initiatives have resulted in influence, gather information to iterate on their SIP and/or related actions—or both. However, as we noted in this review, many issues seem to impede the development and implementation of high-quality SIPs.

Across international contexts in this review—and regardless if the system promoted a “high stakes” framework or not—the influence of governing entities and policies appears to be consistently at odds with the development of high-quality SIPs. Although templates and other forms of guidance can signal to school leaders what is important (VanGronigen et al., 2023), our review suggests that governing entities regularly rely on their templates, policies, and expectations to constrict innovation and creativity at local levels in service of streamlining SIP review processes. In such cases, SIPs are no longer an authentic tool for improvement, but documents to show evidence of compliance with policies and mandates (Narayanan & McCluskey, 2025). Moreover, there is little evidence that governing entities in these studies understand local contexts or have the expertise themselves to engage deeply in SIP development and monitoring. In nearly every area we reviewed, governing entities seem to provide school leaders with more roadblocks than assistance. This finding should not be interpreted as a dismissal of the role governing entities do and can play regarding SIPs. Instead, we wonder if the role of and perspectives within governing entities should shift to being more engaged with and supportive of school leaders and other local stakeholders who are trying to be responsive to their on-the-ground realities—and use SIPs as an authentic tool to do so.

Such a shift seems especially important given how often school leaders and other stakeholders seem unprepared to lead SIP-related work. Although some more developed countries have school leader preparation programs that teach about SIPs and planning processes (Bickmore et al., 2021), SIP quality and implementation typically remain low (Fernandez, 2011; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2020). Then, it should not be surprising that, in developing countries that are less resourced, SIP-related training and professional learning opportunities for school leaders might be even more insufficient (Mutia, 2025). For SIPs to practically matter, more consideration for the preparation of school leaders seems necessary. School leaders are responsible for enlisting key stakeholders to collectively understand and address many issues, needing to answer questions like: What are our most pressing issues? How do we know that? What should we do about them? How do we organize resources to be responsive? Do we know we are on track to be successful? And if we are not on track, how should we adjust? In short, there are considerable challenges aligning people, purposes, and processes with respect to SIP development and implementation—and school leaders need to be aptly prepared to do this work.

Reviewed research also suggests that stakeholders across roles and levels within educational systems might not fully recognize how complex SIP-related work can be. In numerous studies, oversight committee members, school leaders, and teachers indicate knowing and understanding SIP content and development, believe SIPs have influence on student achievement and other outcomes, and express confidence in their abilities to navigate change. Yet, often, SIP quality remains low, implementation remains inconsistent, and mindsets remain fixed (Aaron et al., 2024; Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Strunk et al., 2016). The perceptions of educators responsible for SIP-related work regularly do not match the outputs of that work.

Despite a burgeoning body of literature on SIPs from 2010 through 2025, there is a considerable amount of research that needs doing across international contexts. Murkiness persists in the nature of the SIP: Is it intended to be a tool for compliance, innovation,

strategizing, or something else? Just within the U.S., where more studies of SIPs have occurred, findings have been inconsistent due, in part, to context (e.g., SIPs developed in response to state sanctions or SIPs locally developed in response to frustration with organizational performance). Moreover, we know little about the variation in how local stakeholders determine SIP-related success. In some contexts, simply developing a SIP is the criterion for success whereas, elsewhere, SIP implementation or increases in student test scores are the success markers. It could also be the case that priorities and success determinations are context-specific based on human resources, organizational resources, and prior levels of organizational and student outcomes. With these points in mind, this review suggests that less research has been conducted in the areas of organizing resources and evaluating progress. This issue seems to especially be the case for how those areas could, and likely should, be embedded in both SIP development and implementation. Further, few studies from any context around the world have tried to track SIP-related efforts across the six areas. Thus, we conclude that a combination of intensive research into SIPs in some areas (e.g., evaluating progress) and robust research that comprehensively tracks SIP development and implementation across all areas are important next steps.

Similarly, for educational leadership practice, this review indicates that much more could be intentionally advanced to increase school leaders' skills to develop and implement high-quality SIPs. There is little evidence that school leaders are being adequately prepared to engage in SIP-related work, including strategically building coalitions with various stakeholders, leveraging data to identify organizational challenges, creating a scaffolded series of actions in response to those challenges, intentionally organizing resources to advance actions, or engaging in progress monitoring strategies that allow for real-time adjustments during SIP implementation. Research consistently shows that school leaders across international contexts believe that SIPs are important to guide improvement strategies. Yet, meaningful SIP-related professional learning opportunities for school leaders, in preparation programs or through in-service programming, appear to be few and limited. If SIPs are to be more than symbolic (Narayanan & McCluskey, 2025), school leaders would benefit from professional learning opportunities within and across the six areas in both SIP development (i.e., a high-quality, written document) and implementation (i.e., management, oversight, and adjustment).

The intricacy of developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating SIPs compels more research to inform policy and practice in local contexts around the world. The SIP must be viewed 'on the ground' as a tool to help envision bold changes that can be strategically pursued. Until a better understanding and articulation of SIPs are communicated to various stakeholders, the concept of a SIP continues to be at risk of being viewed as a compliance exercise that is just one more thing school leaders must complete (Aaron et al., 2024).

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Appendix A

In this appendix, we provide some additional information by study reviewed, including the international setting in which the study was conducted. We also indicate which of the six areas of our organizing tool (VanGronigen et al., 2023) the study addresses.

Table A1. Articles Reviewed: International Setting and Area(s) Addressed in the Research.

Study Authors	International Setting	Assessing Current Conditions	Determining Needs	Setting Direction	Organizing Resources	Taking Action	Evaluating Progress
Aaron et al. (2024)	USA	X	X	X	X	X	X
Agi (2017)	Nigeria			X			X
Al-Zboon and Hasan (2012)	Jordan	X	X	X	X		X
Balindong et al. (2024)	Philippines	X	X	X	X	X	
Balkar and Kalman (2018)	Turkey			X	X		
Bas and Korkmaz (2017)	Turkey			X			
Bentayao et al. (2024)	Philippines	X					
Bickmore et al. (2021)	USA		X	X		X	X
Caputo and Rastelli (2014)	Italy	X	X	X	X		
Carvalho et al. (2021)	Portugal	X		X		X	
Carvalho et al. (2022)	Portugal		X	X		X	X
Carvalho et al. (2023)	Portugal	X		X	X	X	X
Chemwei et al. (2014)	Kenya				X		
Chukwumah (2015)	Nigeria		X	X			
Coker (2022)	USA		X		X	X	
Craus et al. (2023)	Philippines		X	X		X	X
Dabesa and Cheramlak (2021)	Ethiopia			X		X	
Daca and Pacadaljen (2020)	Philippines					X	
Decena and Galarosa (2024)	Philippines					X	X
Demir et al. (2019)	USA	X	X			X	X
Dunaway et al. (2012)	USA	X	X	X			X
Dunaway et al. (2014)	USA	X		X		X	X
Ezeugbor and Onedigbo (2019)	Nigeria		X	X			
Francis (2024)	Tanzania	X			X	X	
Gonzales et al. (2022)	USA		X	X		X	
Huber and Conway (2015)	USA		X	X			
Isernhagen (2012)	USA		X		X		
Khanam et al. (2023)	Pakistan		X	X		X	
Kiprop and Kanyiri (2012)	Kenya	X		X	X		
Kyalo and Gichinga (2014)	Kenya	X	X	X		X	
Lesilwa and Nihuka (2024)	Tanzania					X	
Lingam et al. (2014)	Fiji	X	X				
Lockheed et al. (2010)	Jamaica	X	X			X	X
Marianno et al. (2024)	USA		X	X			
Mbugua and Rarieya (2014)	Kenya	X	X	X	X	X	
Meyer et al. (2020)	USA	X		X		X	X
Meyers et al. (2023)	USA		X		X	X	X
Meyers and Hitt (2018)	USA			X		X	
Meyers and VanGronigen (2019)	USA	X	X	X	X		X
Meyers and VanGronigen (2021)	USA		X	X			
Mutia (2025)	Philippines	X	X	X		X	
Myende and Bhengu (2015)	South Africa	X		X		X	
Nicdao and Ancho (2020)	Philippines	X	X	X	X		X
Njeru et al. (2013)	Kenya	X		X			

Table A1. Cont.

Study Authors	International Setting	Assessing Current Conditions	Determining Needs	Setting Direction	Organizing Resources	Taking Action	Evaluating Progress
Sang et al. (2015)	Kenya	X			X	X	
Schlebusch and Mokhatle (2016)	South Africa	X	X	X	X	X	X
Simon and Black (2011)	USA	X	X	X		X	X
Strunk et al. (2016)	USA			X		X	X
Thompson (2018)	Jamaica	X					
Van Der Voort and Wood (2014)	South Africa						X
VanGronigen and Meyers (2017)	USA		X	X			
VanGronigen and Meyers (2020)	USA	X	X	X		X	
VanGronigen and Meyers (2022)	USA		X				
VanGronigen et al. (2023)	USA	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wanjala and Rarieya (2014)	Kenya	X		X	X	X	
Wronowski et al. (2022)	USA	X		X		X	
Yıkıcı and Altınay (2017)	Northern Cyprus	X	X	X	X		
Totals	15 countries	31	33	41	20	33	21

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