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IDEAS: Practical measures make data meaningful p. 51

TOOLS: How to elevate student voice in educator learning p. 67

Improving Together

NETWORKS AMPLIFY LEARNING ACROSS SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

Shifting culture requires learning together

Organizational culture shifts as a result of meaningful collaboration among educators, so where does that leave you when people feel their time is not valued and their needs are not being met? Professional learning that it is relevant to the needs of educators and results in meaningful impact is the process through which a thriving culture of learning and shared responsibility is built.

But how do you bring educators back to the table ready to learn and engage?

Because professional learning is only effective when educators actually engage, learn, and implement new behaviors, Learning Forward partners with educational organizations at all levels to improve understanding of the professional learning needs of educators and to design and implement collaborative learning that

will bring them back to the table and foster the individual and collective efficacy that improves student learning.

To learn more about how Learning Forward can support your efforts to shift the culture of your school through improved professional learning, contact Sharron Helmke, vice president, professional services, sharron.helmke@learningforward.org.

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FOCUS

IMPROVING TOGETHER

IDEAS 51

ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

Visit **learningforward.org/the-learning-professional** for more articles and resources drawn from the Networks for School Improvement community of practice, including:
- Network for College Success on how a common aim helps a diverse network succeed;
- New Tech Network on "live" plan-do-study-act cycles;
- City Year on learning from educator and student perspectives; and
- Shift Results on culturally responsive pedagogy in math.

I SAY

Brandi Nicole Hinnant-Crawford

Associate professor of educational leadership, College of Education, Clemson University, and the author of *Improvement Science in Education: A Primer*

"Bring who you are to the work of improvement. Who you are matters. Where you situate in the world, where you sit, [and] your perspective have a unique view of the system. Don't crush down this identity or that one. We need everybody at the table to undo and disrupt and dismantle some of these structures that keep so many of us bound."

— Excerpted from the HTH Unboxed podcast, "Improvement as a Tool for Our Collective Liberation," February 15, 2022, **bit.ly/3migA27**

this or this?

Your system does exactly what it is *designed* to do

Don't blame the system. It's doing the best it was designed to do. Over time, system policies, structures, and practices that worked in the past can slowly become outdated or disconnected from current needs and goals. As educational needs and best practices change over time, so must your system.

Don't keep fighting a system that isn't designed to get the results you need now. It won't get better. The sooner you inventory and adjust the parts of the system that no longer serve your needs, the sooner all your effort will result in impact.

Learning Forward can support system improvement by partnering with you for strategic planning, comprehensive professional learning

plan design, program evaluation, or implementation of Standards for Professional Learning. Take a strong step forward today to ensure systemwide intentionality that produces results.

Contact us to see how we can help.

For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, vice president, professional services, sharron.helmke@learningforward.org.

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HERE WE GO
Suzanne Bouffard

LEARNING TOGETHER IS THE BEST WAY FORWARD

"Improving together" is a fitting description not only for this issue, but for everything we strive to do in *The Learning Professional* and at our parent organization, Learning Forward. We are dedicated to continuous improvement in teaching, leading, and learning because when educators learn and grow, students learn and grow, and ultimately thrive.

We are proud to partner on this special issue with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is also deeply committed to continuous improvement. That commitment is evident in the foundation's support for Networks for School Improvement, collaboratives that are working across schools and districts to build educators' capacity to improve outcomes for students from historically marginalized communities.

The networks, which are featured in this issue, apply methods from improvement science and other improvement approaches to test change ideas at the local level to make meaningful change for educators and students. They operate in varied contexts and have different foci, but their members come together regularly as a community of practice to share knowledge, build skills, and support one another. The network members' commitment to improvement is multilayered, as they seek to continually improve their own practice while building the capacity of educators in their local contexts to do the same.

We are honored to share their stories, including their successes and challenges as well as some of the processes and tools they have created to help other educators learn, reflect, grow, and improve. And we are grateful for the partnership of guest editor Lynn Olson, whose expertise in both educational improvement and strategic communications have been instrumental in bringing their stories to life.

As the authors worked with us on their articles, they embodied the spirit of continuous learning and improvement they describe in the pages of the journal. They listened deeply to their peers in and across network teams, engaged in deep inquiry about their practices and lessons learned, tried various writing approaches, and adapted their articles based on feedback and the needs of our readers. The result is a set of articles that are deeply rooted in local contexts but have broad applicability to learning professionals who have diverse roles, settings, and challenges.

This issue's articles remind us that high-quality professional learning comes in many shapes and sizes — often not in the traditional mold that some policymakers and even educators themselves have come to expect. It can come in the form of one school team visiting another's classrooms and asking, "How did you do it that way — and why?" It can come from empowering veteran teachers to mentor early career teachers in intentional ways connected to improvement goals. It can come through recognizing students as the experts of their own experience and listening deeply to them. Professional learning can also come in the form of publishing in a professional journal such as this one, from taking the time to reflect on and write about one's own learning to reading about and applying others' learning and insights.

We know, and research confirms, that we learn better when we learn together. That's why we encourage you to share this issue with your colleagues and friends and discuss your learning. Ask questions, share opinions, find common ground, disagree. We will be hosting discussions about the issue in the coming weeks and months, so make sure you sign up for our email list at **learningforward.org** to be notified of those opportunities. We look forward to continuing to learn from you and with you, together. ■

This issue's articles remind us that high-quality professional learning comes in many shapes and sizes — often not in the traditional mold that some policymakers and even educators themselves have come to expect.

Suzanne Bouffard (suzanne.bouffard@ learningforward. org) is editor of *The Learning Professional.*

About our style and word usage

The Learning Professional follows the guidelines set forth in the AP Stylebook. However, we defer to authors' preferences for terminology and capitalization with regard to race and ethnicity. We reserve the right to exclude any terms we consider to convey insult or harm.

VOICES

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Change is hard, but necessary for improvement. Processes, tools, and goals that are intentional and relationship-centered can help educators overcome the barriers and move forward. The columnists in this issue offer guidance to inspire your improvement work.

CALL TO ACTION
Frederick Brown

IMPROVEMENT CYCLES CAN CHANGE STUDENTS' LIVES

My Learning Forward colleagues and I are inspired by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's commitment to the spirit of continuous improvement, and we are grateful for their partnership that has allowed us to shine a light on collaborative cycles of improvement in this issue of *The Learning Professional.*

When people ask me how improvement cycles help teachers, I think back to when I was a teacher who didn't know about improvement methods. In particular, I recall my second year as teacher, when I had a little knowledge, but not a lot. (You know what they say about a little knowledge.)

My students had challenges, and I worked hard to help them overcome those challenges, but I didn't have a focused way of thinking about what to do. I would try an instructional strategy I had read or heard about, without any real sense of whether or why it would work for my particular students. I didn't know if these approaches were making a difference until I received my students' state test results at the end of the year. By then, I had tried so many different things that there was no way to tell what worked and for whom. Furthermore, the students had already moved on to the next grade.

Source: Hirsh & Crow, 2017

My principal always commended me for being an innovative teacher, and I know I did some good for those students. However, I know I could have done more for them if I had engaged in improvement cycles — if I had collected more precise data about their needs, my strategies, and the results. I could have reflected and made timely adaptations to provide what they needed.

Things changed in my third year of teaching when I started planning common lessons with my fellow grade-level teachers. That marked a transition from working in isolation to behaving more like a learning community. Learning communities are essential to professional learning and improving practice, and they are an ideal forum for engaging in continuous improvement cycles.

In the 2022 version of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, many of the elements of the standard we previously framed as the Learning Communities standard were embedded in the new Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard, as was the importance of continuous improvement methods. This standard reads: "*Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators engage in continuous improvement, build collaboration skills and capacity, and share responsibility for improving learning for all students*" (Learning Forward, 2022).

Collaborative learning communities are now at the center of my work, and I have used a collaborative lens to facilitate many improvement processes with districts and schools. One of my favorite continuous improvement models comes from *Becoming a Learning Team*, which illustrates and guides educators' use of Learning Forward's learning team cycle (Hirsh & Crow, 2017). The cycle has five steps:

1. Analyze data.
2. Set goals.
3. Learn individually and collaboratively.
4. Implement new learning.
5. Monitor, assess, and adjust practice.

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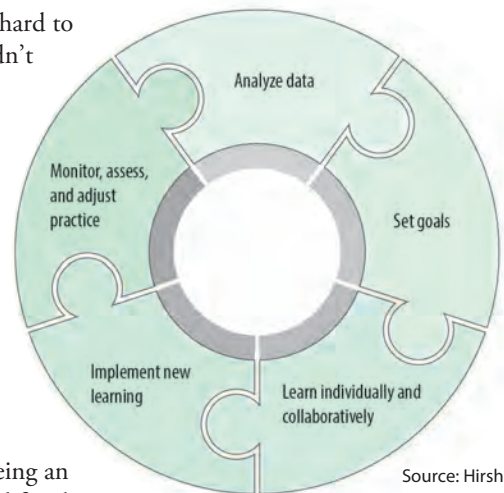
This cycle helps teams approach their day-to-day work with a different lens — an inquiry lens — that leads to more learning for everyone involved. That's what improvement cycles are really about, whether you use Learning Forward's learning team cycle, plan-do-study-act cycles, or another method.

Regardless of which method you use, I recommend paying attention to these do's and don'ts as you go about the process of continuous improvement.

DO expand your data thinking.

Teams often limit their thinking about what kinds of data to analyze and reflect on, focusing primarily on student work, summative and formative assessments, and discipline data. But there are many other highly valuable sources of information. For example, a high school I worked with in Chicago spent a great deal of time monitoring which students spoke in which classes to look for trends in student engagement.

Here are other questions and data sources to consider that were recommended in *Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism* (2019):

- Which students did I talk to today and call on this week, and are there any racial patterns?
- On school climate surveys and focus group discussions, how are student groups responding, and what are the trends?
- How often do students report witnessing intentional or unintentional acts of discrimination or prejudice?

I also remind teams to do what Hirsh and Crow recommend: Create safe spaces for these data conversations. They state, "Successful teams adopt norms that ensure the privacy of their conversations and eliminate the fear of reprisals for admitting they need help. They want every team member to be comfortable in examining all aspects of the data" (Hirsh & Crow, 2017).

DON'T skip the learning.

I'm always amazed how quickly teams skip the learning in their continuous improvement strategies. They plan, do, study, and act without really incorporating their insights and changing their work going forward. Hirsh and Crow (2017) urge teams to address the question, "How will we engage in learning to achieve desired outcomes for both ourselves and our students?" Asking this question as part of a cycle helps teams recognize that their learning is critical. Often, an examination of the teachers' learning needs can help them more effectively address their students' learning needs. For example, if data show many students aren't performing well on a specific area of the formative assessment, could the learning gap be the teachers rather than the students? Without taking time to engage in the learning before the teaching, teams are potentially robbing their students of access to more effective practices.

As part of this step, it's also important to differentiate the learning for the adults based on what the data show. For example, if student engagement data for 6th-grade students in a school are concerning, it may not be necessary for every member of the team to engage in the same type of learning. Is engagement high in some classes but not in others? Could some team members benefit from specific coaching strategies while others receive more intensive support? Could one team member be a model for others in a school environment that has a culture of improvement and doesn't have teachers who fear being put on a pedestal?

DON'T limit your use of an improvement cycle.

Teams tend to use improvement cycles to focus on traditional instructional strategies, but I've already offered some examples that go beyond those strategies to look at student voice and engagement. Improvement cycles can also be used to look at

leadership strategies, district structures, and more. I encourage teams to make improvement cycles a part of how they do business.

I was impressed with a district team that used Learning Forward's learning team cycle to examine a discipline policy that had long been in place in one of their high schools. When team members looked at their discipline data, they saw that Black and Brown students were disproportionately impacted by a policy that sent tardy students to in-house suspension. The staff wasn't consistently applying the policy. As a result, Black and Brown students were missing classes and important learning experiences. After engaging in the learning team cycle, with a special focus on engaging in their own learning about alternative disciplinary strategies, the team overhauled the policy. The policy shift changed students' lives at that school, and it might not have happened without the team's engagement in an improvement cycle.

DO keep the cycles going.

I've heard educators say, "We used the cycle, and everything is great now. Problem solved." But learning should never stop, and cycles shouldn't stop, either. We should continue to generate and analyze data and refine our practices. I love to hear educators say, "The cycle helped us improve our process, and we realized we have so much more to learn. We'll continue to keep an eye on the data." I encourage all learning professionals to embrace that spirit and keep growing.

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IC MAPS BRING CLARITY TO COMPLEX CHANGE PROJECTS

IC maps describe what an innovation's major components look like in practice and how users vary these components while implementing them.

It can be challenging to translate a vision of school improvement into daily practice, especially when multiple schools or systems are working together to achieve change at scale. To help address this challenge, the hub team of the Texas Network for School Improvement (TxNSI) created a set of Innovation Configuration (IC) maps (Hall & Hord, 2010; Hord et al., 2006), a resource to describe what continuous improvement looks like when enacted in systems and schools. These maps provide clear descriptions of what it looks like when schools operate as a successful, improvement-focused network.

IC maps describe what an innovation's major components look like in practice and how users vary these components while implementing them. They are deliberately multifunctional; they can guide planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and more.

Learning Forward has used IC maps for many years, primarily to support understanding and implementation of Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022), and we have found that they provide much-appreciated clarity and direction for complex change efforts. They can be a valuable resource for networks like TxNSI, as well as for other systems seeking to improve practice.
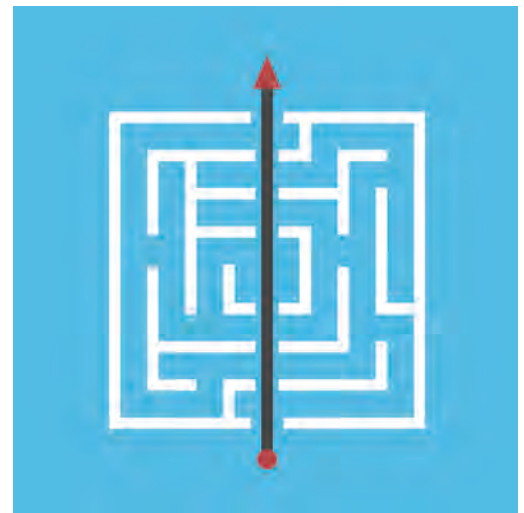
ABOUT TXNSI

The Texas Network for School Improvement (TxNSI) Collaborative is a networked improvement community supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The network's goal is to increase the percentage of Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty who are on track to college and career success by the end of 8th grade, using math as the entry point. TxNSI uses a set of braided supports: tailored professional learning, coaching to support campus teams, professional learning communities, support for testing change ideas to address specific challenges, and a facilitated network approach to learn from one another.

The network spans districts in Texas Education Service Center Regions 10 and 11. Participating district and campus teams define a local aim within the context of the overall network aim before selecting a specific change idea to implement through the use of a rapid-cycle continuous improvement framework.

Three organizations form the hub team that supports schools. Educate Texas serves as the network lead, identifying schools, coordinating operations and communications, and analyzing network-level data. Learning Forward focuses on professional learning for network educators, emphasizing continuous improvement methods. The Dana Center provides expertise in mathematics instruction and research.

As part of that hub, Learning Forward led the writing process for the TxNSI IC maps, with review and input from the other TxNSI hub team members, Educate Texas and the Dana Center. We then designated district leaders from Crowley ISD and Richardson ISD to review

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the maps aligned with their specific role (e.g., coach or principal), reflect on where they found themselves on the spectrum of implementation, and offer feedback. One district leader said that the language helped her to recenter on the expectations for continuous improvement.

ABOUT THE IC MAPS

The TxNSI IC maps help clarify the roles and attributes of the network, foster dialogue about best practices, and provide direction for professional learning and network implementation. The intentional structure of an IC map communicates the major principles or key ideas, main components, and desired outcomes of the innovation. Each desired outcome has a continuum of behaviors for each designated role. The most desirable or ideal behavior is in the column on the left. The column on the right describes an entry-level behavior. By design, IC maps acknowledge differences in system contexts, structures, needs, and resources and allow for flexibility and creativity in reaching the desired outcomes.

The TxNSI IC maps are informed by Standards for Professional Learning and are a valuable tool for ensuring that improvement efforts align with the standards. For example, by making explicit the continuum of behaviors educators might progress through to strengthen implementation of the innovation over time, the IC maps reinforce the **Implementation** standard.

IC maps also help educators deepen their **Professional Expertise**. They show the variations across and among educator roles so educators can strategize and plan at the school or system level, attending to coherence and alignment across roles and balancing individual and collective learning needs. They also help learning designers build on educators' prior knowledge, experiences, and strengths, and "spread expertise among team members" and "leverage complementary expertise efficiently to accomplish shared goals" (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 30).

In addition, the IC maps encourage individuals and school teams to check progress and examine data, which enacts the **Evidence** standard and helps educators monitor, assess, and plan for future professional learning.

TXNSI IC MAPS IN PRACTICE

At the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, facilitators from the network schools and systems used the IC map for their role to reflect on their behaviors, where they would like to improve, and what support they need to continue working toward the ideal state. The hub team examined the self-report data and used the responses to help frame one-on-one coaching and group learning. Additionally, school and district leaders reflected after a midyear network convening. Their responses will help us design professional learning with an eye toward sustainability.

We see great value in this process, and we encourage educators from other systems to consider how they can use IC maps and related tools for intentional improvement. You can access the full TxNSI IC maps on our website at **learningforward. org/networks/#TXNSI**. Learn more about the Texas Network for School Improvement (TxNSI) at **txnsi.org**.

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COACHES KEEP EVERYONE WORKING TOWARD A COMMON GOAL

Coaches can serve as the glue that binds people and strategies together, ensuring that everyone is working toward a common goal and putting that goal into action.

The landscape of school improvement can seem overwhelming, with multiple moving parts and a host of players who hold roles that are critical but disconnected from each another. Many districts have a resource for bringing these pieces together that they often overlook: instructional coaches. Coaches can serve as the glue that binds people and strategies together, ensuring that everyone is working toward a common goal and putting that goal into action.

The secret to their "stickiness" is coaches' hands-on work at multiple levels. They work one-on-one with teachers to provide guidance that is consistent with district and schoolwide goals but also personalized to teachers' and students' challenges and strengths. They also partner with school leaders to ensure that school improvement plans are responsive to the evolving needs of students and staff. And across these levels, they facilitate data conversations and partner with teachers by co-planning, co-teaching, and modeling strategies for teachers to focus on both individual and schoolwide goals.

COACHES BUILD COHERENCE

In my work consulting to coaches and co-hosting the weekly #educoach chat on Twitter, I see many examples of this "glue" function that a coherent coaching program provides. One of those examples comes from Shelby County Public Schools in Shelbyville, Kentucky. Jennifer Cox, director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, oversees the work of the district's instructional coaches. She explained how coaches build coherence in the district's innovative 30-60-90 improvement plan process.

Cox said that the 30-60-90-day model is a framework often used in business, especially in onboarding employees, but that, in her district, "We use it to set goals, name actions, and measure progress." Each month, throughout the school year, the district's superintendent, Sally Sugg, leads improvement conferences with each of the district's 14 school administration teams. Team compositions vary among schools but always include the principal and instructional coach.

When I asked Cox why coaches are seen as a vital part of the teams, she told me that administrators recognize the importance of coaches aligning their support for teachers with district goals and learning priorities and value coaches' input to those priorities based on what they see and hear in school buildings. She added that including coaches on the teams also communicates the high value the district places on coaching and "helps principals and the superintendent see the tangible connection between coaching and student learning."

During these meetings, teams discuss and reflect on the district's three main school

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improvement pillars: culture and climate; the district's profile of a graduate, which describes six enduring skills students should know and be able to do by graduation; and academic progress. Every participant is responsible for planning actions to take in the next 30 days to help meet their building's specific identified needs and then being accountable for reporting on those to the group at the next meeting. Cox says, "These meetings are intended to model the ongoing feedback loop that we know is so important for our learners — both adult and student learners."

It's no surprise to those of us who are coaching veterans that the instructional coaches play a crucial role in helping the team members put these goals and plans into action. They develop individual and group coaching sessions, design lab classroom visits, facilitate professional learning communities, and provide other support tailored to the school's monthly goals. In addition, coaches meet with principals every one to two weeks to continue refining and reflecting on their work and progress.

By working across these levels and ensuring that all the action steps they support are aligned, coaches help school improvement plans become living, breathing documents that drive real change, rather than notebooks sitting on a shelf.

COACHES BENEFIT FROM SUPPORT

As a coach of coaches, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that coaches can't create coherence on their own. They need buy-in from both teachers and leaders. They also need support. All of the Shelby County coaches have engaged in comprehensive professional learning about the Cognitive Coaching approach from the Thinking Collaborative, which is focused on translating beliefs into sustained action, and author and education consultant Diane Sweeney's student-centered coaching model, which centers on shifting the coaching focus from "fixing teachers" to working collaboratively to enhance student outcomes, grounded in student data.

Cox understands that coaches need consistent support to refine their skills and improve their practice and that investing in building their capacity will ultimately lead to better outcomes for teachers and students. To facilitate this, she provides monthly half-day sessions for coaches to come together and reflect on their work, share ideas, and collaborate on new strategies. These sessions are designed to create a supportive learning community where coaches can openly discuss their challenges and successes and receive feedback and guidance from their peers and Cox.

CONSISTENT AND SUPPORTIVE PRESENCE

Fortunately, the Shelby County Public Schools aren't alone in the way they use coaching. This district is just one of many examples of sustained school improvement where instructional coaches support professionals in many important roles. But this district is a model for how coaches can serve as a catalyst for coherence, providing a consistent and supportive presence to ensure that the school improvement plan remains a priority for all stakeholders and that everyone is working together toward a common goal.

Whether you are a teacher, administrator, or community member, I urge you to recognize and support the vital work of instructional coaches in your schools. Their expertise, dedication, and personalized approach can make the difference in helping teachers and students reach their full potential. By working together and investing in their expertise, we can create a brighter future for all students. ■

TO EFFECT REAL CHANGE, BUILD RELATIONSHIPS FIRST

The fact that the work of collaboration is hard shouldn't make us any less committed to figuring out how to get it right.

E arly in my professional career, I identified my "why" as bringing together diverse groups of people to solve complex problems and make the world a better place. It's ambitious, but that's the point. It feels important enough to get up and work for every day.

I believe that, if we work together, solving our most pressing issues in education is within our reach. After all, human capacity and potential are enormous — we've created everything from the abacus to organ bioprinting.

One structure for bringing people together to learn about and solve complex problems is improvement science, a method for planning, implementing, and studying change ideas that is a focus of this journal issue. In her book, *Improvement Science in Education: A Primer*, Brandi Nicole Hinnant-Crawford (2020) wrote, "Harnessing the power of the collective is the essence of the first principle of improvement science."

That focus on collaboration is not always front and center in improvement science. Traditionally, the first principle that improvers emphasize is making the work problem-specific and user-centered. Hinnant-Crawford's interpretation is important because it humanizes the process of improvement science and reminds us of the power of working together. In fact, it makes me wonder: Can we even call ourselves practitioners of continuous improvement if we have not been intentional about learning how to be together?

One of my favorite historical examples of learning how to be together, and making change as a result, is of the first Rainbow Coalition, an unexpected alliance of Black, Latinx, and white activists in Chicago, Illinois, who in the 1960s improved their communities by organizing blood drives, a health clinic, and free breakfast programs (Santisteban, 2019). The coalition worked because it brought together diverse community members who were close to the problems in their community and had a deep understanding of what solutions would be the most helpful. However, before they could solve any of their collective problems, they had to find ways to connect across their segregated communities and overcome explicit and implicit biases about one another. They had to learn to communicate with one another, trust each other, and find common ground. Their improvement efforts would have been impossible if they had skipped those steps.

I believe something similar is possible in schools. To be honest, though, I overestimated how easy it would be to bring together a diverse group of people and keep them working together to

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improve schools, especially within the current context of tensions and divisions across race, class, and political lines.

Many of the systems operational in schools today were designed in ways that championed individualism. Most teachers work in isolation for a significant portion of the day. Students are assessed on their individual efforts. School administrators have limited and narrow ways to connect with one another, even in the same district. Caregivers and other community members are only invited to schools on select days.

Given these long-standing structures, we often fail to traverse socially constructed barriers and build bridges, even when we could. But the fact that the work of collaboration is hard shouldn't make us any less committed to figuring out how to get it right.

I invite you to start by intentionally designing and building an improvement team that is inclusive and prepared to learn together. Here are some questions you might ask yourself during design:

1. Have you given yourself time to find and recruit members for your improvement team? Are you willing to add members if you find a key perspective is missing?
2. Does everyone feel included? How do you know?
3. What working agreements do you need to function well as a team?
4. Are team members able to work through conflict? Pay particular attention to how they handle conflict that arises from or is informed by implicit biases. How do you know whether they are able to work through conflict? How can you build the team's capacity to do so?

Taking time to reflect and act on these questions increases your chances of engaging in improvement efforts that are truly collaborative and built to last.

When people feel like decisions and processes for improvement are being made *with* them instead of *to* them or *for* them, there is likely to be more collective action and less resistance. When people dream and create together, they become more invested in one another and in seeing their collective dream come to fruition.

I know this takes time that we may feel we don't have, but we have to make time for each other. I believe wholeheartedly that improving our relationships with one another is the first necessary and meaningful step we can take to transform ourselves, our schools, and our world.

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[NEW]
Standards Assessment Inventory

- Aligned to 2022 standards
- New SAI platform
- Improved user experience
- Enhanced reporting capabilities

" *Your first step to implementing the 2022 Standards for Professional Learning.* "

SET YOUR COURSE FOR IMPLEMENTING THE REVISED STANDARDS BY ASSESSING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN YOUR SYSTEM.

Coming April 2023

The Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) is a confidential, web-based survey that provides schools and systems with data on the quality of their professional learning as defined by Standards for Professional Learning. Taken by school-based instructional staff, the SAI is a valid and reliable instrument aligned directly to the 2022 standards and measures whether rigorous content for each learner, transformational processes, and conditions for success are in place in your schools and system for professional learning to impact every educator and student.

SAI results help schools and systems focus on the actions that contribute to high-quality professional learning. The SAI collects school and system data and provides you with a detailed series of reports, resources, and data analysis tools to ensure you use your results to plan improvements that will impact teaching and learning in your system.

SCHOOLS USE THE SAI TO:

1. Identify clear expectations and specific actions that contribute to high-quality professional learning.

2. Get benchmark data that provides a clear picture of what's working and where to focus resources.

3. Inform schoolwide practices and guide school improvement planning.

4. Identify next (or first) steps toward standards implementation.

5. Introduce instructional staff to Standards for Professional Learning.

6. Initiate dialogue and reflection among staff about professional learning.

7. Evaluate the impact of professional learning programs.

DISTRICTS AND STATES USE THE SAI TO:

1. Identify schools with similar needs and priorities.

2. Identify school strengths in certain areas to share exemplary practices with others.

3. Assess whether a particular improvement effort has contributed to the quality of professional learning across several schools or systems.

4. Recognize schools for quality professional learning.

5. Identify next steps for standards implementation.

CONTACT US

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FOCUS ON WELLNESS
Jacobē Bell

HEALING-CENTERED ENVIRONMENTS FILL GAPS IN EDUCATOR WELLNESS

In a climate where teachers are leaving the profession due to fatigue, burnout, and lack of support, education systems need to do more to promote teachers' well-being than the typical wellness week events like massages and catered lunches. They need to go deeper because there is no quick fix to the stresses and challenges educators face.

To foster well-being at a deeper level, we can take inspiration from a question commonly asked in improvement science: How do we get better at getting better (Bryk et al., 2015)? This question is usually about performance, efficiency, or effectiveness. But we also need to ask: How we can get better at cultivating the well-being of our people?

I believe this starts with creating a healing-centered environment and way of being. This is different from other school climate approaches because it takes a holistic approach and is rooted in collective healing. In schools, we often talk about trauma-informed practices or social and emotional learning for students, but we don't explicitly address how the environment influences educators or how it could better support them.

A healing-centered approach fills that gap. It has three main components: It is culturally grounded, supports restoration of identity, and supports and attends to practitioner healing (Acosta, 2020; Ginwright, 2018).

Grounding in culture. Zaretta Hammond (2014) defines culture as "the way that every brain makes sense of the world. That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture … . The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events" (p. 22). Connecting to one's culture can help one feel more grounded, so by making all cultures matter in schools, we can cultivate a healthier work environment.

Reflection prompts can encourage culturally grounded wellness practices by changing our thinking habits, which in turn shape actions. These prompts might include asking yourself and your teams:

- Who are our teachers? What are their cultures and subcultures?
- What are the cultural values present in our school community?
- What are the cultural practices for healing that we champion, and what are those we push unwittingly to the side?

Affirming identity and humanity. Identity and culture are intertwined. Identity is who you are and is influenced by a unique set of characteristics, lived experiences, and social roles. Attending to identity can provide a sense of belonging, well-being, and confidence. But, in many schools, identity is not affirmed or celebrated, and this has caused harm to many educators because it slowly adds emotional weight and exacerbates tiredness that many teachers carry (Garcia, 2019).

> Education systems need to do more to promote teachers' well-being than the typical wellness week events. There is no quick fix to the stresses and challenges educators face.

Jacobē Bell (jbell@teachingmatters.org) is a network director at Teaching Matters.

When it comes to professional learning, one size does NOT fit all

Are you tired of professional learning initiatives that feel like they were designed for someone else? Or professional learning that feels compliance-driven rather than meaningful?

Do you crave learning opportunities that are designed and facilitated to be relevant and adaptable to your needs and the needs of the students you serve? Every student is unique, every educator faces unique challenges, and every campus and district serves a diverse community. Sometimes, professional learning can feel like that's been forgotten.

In today's learning environment, given the wonderful diversity and the sometimes overwhelming challenges we face as educators, professional learning can feel like it's either the key to success or a drain on our valuable time.

Make sure that the professional learning you are offering your educators is designed and crafted to fit their needs. Learning Forward has spent more than 50 years learning, listening, and working with districts to craft customized professional learning solutions that will have educators feeling seen, valued, understood, and supported in their efforts to meet students' needs.

For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, vice president, professional services, sharron.helmke@learningforward.org.

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Some thinking habits that are helpful for attending to teachers' identity and humanity in a healing-centered environment include asking:

- Are we seeing teachers beyond their cognitive abilities?
- How are we providing space for the full humanity of teachers?
- How does our school space validate and affirm teachers' multiple and intersectional identities?
- How are the cultures and identities of teachers present in professional learning?

Healing practices. Healing practices are those that help us acknowledge, metabolize, and heal from the challenges we face as teachers. This is about fully articulating our own and our colleagues' humanity (Garcia, 2019). Some questions to consider for fostering healing practices are:

- How are we building relationships with teachers?
- How are we building systems that support collective healing?
- How are we building space for restorative or transformative justice?
- How are we engaging in critical reflection?
- In professional learning, are we providing space for teachers to reflect on how their lived experiences shape their work?

To create spaces for educators to flourish, we must consider the mind, body, and spirit of a person as equally important. If we disinvest in any of these areas, we are contributing to teacher burnout. We must also work in partnership with teachers because well-being is a collective endeavor.

There is no one way to engage in healing-centered environments and ways of being in your school. If you're wondering where to begin, start with talking to your staff. Ask the hard questions. Sit in discomfort and do generous listening. Here are some questions you can ask, which you may want to adapt to your own context:

- Tell me about a time you felt like your humanity was honored in our school community.
- Tell me about a time when navigating a situation or environment in our school community was hard. What was the effect it had on you?
- What is one word that describes how your self-care has been this year? How has the school community contributed or detracted from this?
- Do you feel your job here is sustainable? What would make the job more sustainable?
- What could I do to create a culture of well-being for staff?

After these conversations, engage in the healing-centered thinking habits and reflection questions described above and work to create ways for the staff to envision and re-create together. Consider spending time at your next staff meeting or professional learning community engaging in a dreaming activity where they imagine what a healing-centered environment and way of being could look like, sound like, and feel like, and what a potential first step could be. Dreaming is where change first begins. Dream big, critically reflect, and then take action.

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NETWORKS DRIVE IMPROVEMENT

School improvement takes ongoing, collaborative learning among all education stakeholders. Learning networks create space and structure for educators to understand root causes of complex problems, engage in inquiry, test new ideas, examine results, reflect, and adapt, as this section's authors illustrate.

Educators discuss methods for continuous improvement at a June 2022 convening in Baltimore, Maryland, organized by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Top: Tarima Levine from Bank Street College of Education.

Middle: Members of the Networks for School Improvement community of practice.

Bottom: Andrea Clay from the Center for Public Research and Leadership.

Networks forge a path to school improvement

BY LYNN OLSON

When educators work collaboratively to improve their practice, they build their capacity to achieve equitable and excellent outcomes for all students. As Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) emphasize, educators' continual learning is key to improving students' learning. When supported and empowered to do so, educators who know their students and settings are best positioned to identify solutions that meet their particular needs.

But how do educators know where to start? And how will they know if the changes they make, which may be local and small scale, are actually an improvement?

Continuous improvement methods, widely used in fields such as medicine, can help educators identify and try out adjustments in practice, known as "change ideas," which contribute to better outcomes and more equitable

NETWORKS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: SCHOOL LOCATIONS
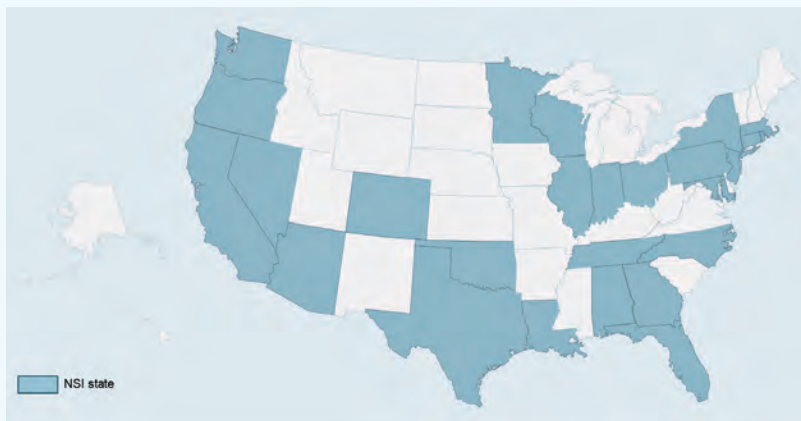
Networks for School Improvement hub organizations

NSI state

- Access ASU
- American Institutes for Research
- Baltimore City Public Schools
- Bank Street College
- BARR Center
- California Education Partners
- Connecticut RISE
- City Year
- The Commit Partnership
- Communities Foundation of Texas (TXNSI)
- CORE Districts
- Denver Public Schools
- Eskolta School Research and Design

- High Tech High Graduate School of Education
- Institute for Learning
- KIPP Foundation
- Network for College Success
- New Tech Network
- New Visions for Public Schools
- New York City Department of Education
- Partners in School Innovation
- Teach Plus
- Teaching Matters
- Tulare County Office of Education

systems for students. As teachers and leaders reflect on their learning and share what's working, educators in other schools and systems can learn about them, try them out, and adapt them to their contexts. Continuous improvement approaches enable cycles of professional learning and innovation that spiral out from one context to another.

Since 2018, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested in 24 organizations across the United States to support networks of schools to use continuous improvement methods to advance equity in education — with the specific aim to increase the number of Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty who earn a high school diploma, enroll in college, and are on track for college success.

This issue of *The Learning Professional* elevates the voices of educators from the Gates-funded Networks for School Improvement as they describe what they have learned from their experiences. Many of their examples — from how to center equity to the importance of elevating teacher leadership and student voice — matter for all learning professionals, even those who are not specifically using continuous improvement methods.

ABOUT NETWORKS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The Networks for School Improvement support educators to use data to adapt research- and evidence-based practices to their specific contexts through cycles of continuous inquiry. Through peer-to-peer learning in cross-school and cross-district networks, educators share what they are learning with each other and with the broader field. While no two networks are alike, they use some common approaches that can be helpful to anyone interested in building educators' knowledge and capacity to improve instructional practices and school processes.

1. Understand the system that is producing the current inequitable results through careful qualitative and quantitative data analysis, paying particular attention to outcomes for students furthest from opportunity.
2. Identify the underlying or root causes that are producing the variation in results through tools like fishbone diagrams and Five Whys.
3. Create a theory for how to improve the current system and

test evidence-based change ideas or sets of change ideas in practice so that teams can identify the most promising ideas to scale and spread. Teams do this through structured cycles of inquiry, most typically PDSA cycles, in which teams:

- **Plan:** Plan the change they want to try, predict what will happen as a result, and decide what data to gather to test their hypothesis;
- **Do:** Test their research-based change idea in practice;
- **Study:** Reflect on what they have learned using the data they have gathered; and
- **Act:** Consider whether to adopt, adapt, or abandon a change idea based on the evidence.

Inquiry cycles can last for a few days to several weeks, with educators engaging in multiple cycles throughout the academic year and, potentially, multiple change ideas that they want to test.

The networks have applied these methods to a range of specific strategies, all in the service of the ultimate goal of educational equity.

THE BEST SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENTS COME FROM DIVERSE VOICES OF EDUCATORS

By Vivian Mihalakis

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is thrilled to support this special issue of *The Learning Professional*, which shares stories from our Networks for School Improvement grantees. We are inspired by the educators in these networks, who are working together to use research and data to identify, address, and solve common problems that keep young people, especially those who have traditionally been furthest from opportunity, from reaching their full potential.

We launched the Networks for School Improvement portfolio in 2018 because we know that the solutions that work best for students are ones that marry research with the wisdom and experience of the educators who know their students' talents, interests, and needs. One-size-fits-all solutions rarely fit at all. The best solutions come from bringing together diverse voices of educators with different expertise and from different contexts.

Networks for School Improvement grantees seek to improve outcomes for Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty by implementing structures and routines that empower practitioners to test and adapt evidence-based practices to their classrooms and schools, then use actionable, meaningful, and relevant data to understand how they work for students.

In many cases, educators are partnering directly with students to create classrooms and schools that are motivating, engaging, and equitable. And like you, they've done this deep work under the challenging circumstances of the last few years. I'm humbled by their commitment to their students and to each other.

We hope that you, like our team at the foundation, discover ways to implement and adopt improvement approaches in your practice so that your educators and students learn and thrive.

Vivian Mihalakis is a deputy director at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

improvement practices that many schools and communities want to implement but may not have experience with, including:

- Protocols and processes to help center equity and unearth educator beliefs and biases;
- Methods for creating space and conditions for educator collaboration and risk-taking;
- Strategies for supporting teacher leadership and agency;
- Ways to develop mentoring and coaching capacity and expertise;
- Tools for elevating student voice and focusing on the whole student, using asset-based frameworks; and
- Routines, conditions, and processes to support data-driven decision-making, including "lightweight" measures that can be used at the classroom and school levels.

These strategies reflect core components of high-quality professional learning and all 11 Standards for Professional Learning. As with all meaningful learning, continuous improvement approaches require a deep, ongoing commitment to building educators' capacity for inquiry, growth, and change.

As the standards remind us, there is no single, isolated strategy that will improve educational practice and student outcomes. The way forward lies in a systems approach to incremental progress where we try, test, and learn from one another.

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Some have focused on improving specific literacy or math instructional practices, while others have focused on creating more supportive school environments, where students feel connected to adults, each other, and the school community.

Still others have homed in on evidence-based strategies and processes that support students to apply, enroll, and persist in colleges that are the best fit for them. The composition of the network teams varies according to their specific strategies and goals — for example, some are composed of grade-level or content-area teachers, while others include school counselors and external service providers.

All of the networks and network members included in this issue share an unwavering commitment to designing more equitable systems, a dedication to continuous improvement, and the use of indicators that predict students' long-term outcomes and success.

While much of the work described in this issue focuses on intermediate outcomes — such as how to increase student engagement, attendance, freshmen grade point averages, and college-application rates — these indicators correlate strongly to longer-term outcomes, including improved high school completion and college enrollment and persistence rates.

INSPIRATION FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The articles in this issue provide real-world examples of professional learning strategies and continuous

TOOLS AND RESOURCES FOR IMPROVEMENT WORK

Networks for School Improvement have created a range of tools and resources to help other educators engage in improvement work. The free resources listed here cover crucial elements, including leadership, equity, measurement, and more.

Website	Organization	Description
Continuous Improvement for Equity Resource Hub **ci4equity.org**	Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium	Guided pathways with customized lists of resources tailored to teams' progress on their improvement journeys.
Improvement for Equity by Design Resources **iexd.org/resources/**	High Tech High Graduate School of Education	Improvement protocols, articles, videos, podcasts, and slide decks that support educators to engage in continuous improvement efforts in schools.
Leading Through Learning Playbook **leadingthroughlearning.org**	CPRL Center for Public Research and Leadership	Tools, resources, and support for teams to lead for equity. Includes a tool to help leaders develop a customized theory of leadership with an aligned measurement framework.
Learning Lab for School Improvement Teams **learninglab.catalyst-ed.org**	Catalyst:Ed	Tools for self-assessment, a curated resource library, and a process for connecting with improvement experts.
Math Practical Measurement **mpm.wested.org**	WestEd	Math measurement tools that are easy to use and yield actionable data to improve equitable student-centered math classrooms in grades 6-9. Includes guides to help use the measures and apply the results.
Online Learning Library **shift-results.com/online-learning/**	Shift Improvement Consulting	Videos and tools that can help improve equitable outcomes and build more diverse and inclusive communities. Videos include topics such as introduction to improvement, root cause analysis, building a culture of empathy and capacity for change, and measurement for learning.
PERTS resources **perts.net/resources**	Project for Education Research That Scales	Resources that help educators use and improve research-based strategies to equitably support student engagement, agency, and learning, including the Elevate student voice tool.
Student-Powered Improvement **studentpoweredimprovement.com**	Community Design Partners	Resources for designing solutions *with* rather than *for* students. Offers a set of guiding principles, case studies, and an assessment that generates a customized action plan.
The GRAD Partnership resources **gradpartnership.org**	The GRAD Partnership	Resources include a team reflection tool designed to guide the development and implementation of student success systems to ensure environments that lead to graduation and post-secondary success.

Teacher voice drives improvement in Baltimore

BY ZACHARY JAFFE AND AMIEE WINCHESTER

Matt Edelman, a high school English teacher in Baltimore, Maryland, needed to find a way to encourage his special education students to stay engaged, especially while they were working independently with difficult grade-level texts. He started by tracking students' behavior with a points sheet — a typical teacher response to off-task behavior in which the teacher provides rewards or sanctions based on how many points students receive. But Edelman found this approach to be punitive and led to less engagement from his students, so he began tweaking it.

Maybe there should be an end-of-the-week incentive? Or maybe points should be awarded only when tasks are completed? Maybe student reflections on their behavior would work? Edelman tried all of these adjustments, noting the impact on his students' reading engagement each time, until he came up with the version he's using now — a flexible check mark system that allows the teacher to adjust the look-fors on the fly and for students to monitor their own level of focus.

Through these adaptations, Edelman has learned that the carrot-and-stick approach of a teacher offering points for good behavior was much less effective in engaging students in reading activities than a student-driven tool that empowers them to self-regulate.

How did Edelman learn to approach his teaching practice with such a spirit of inquiry and perseverance through initial failures? He is a member of the Baltimore Secondary Literacy Improvement Community, a teacher fellowship with two goals: to develop pedagogy that supports the reading and writing skills of middle and high school students and to develop teachers' skills and habits in continuous improvement — behaviors that empower them to

drive their own professional learning.

The Baltimore Secondary Literacy Improvement Community began in 2019. At that time, over one-third of incoming 6th graders in Baltimore City Public Schools were not showing mastery of foundational phonics skills as measured by the i-Ready reading assessment. A team of us from the Baltimore City Public Schools district office set out to change this pattern by working with literacy coaches and administrators to use the methods of continuous improvement to better understand the root causes of the literacy skills gap and develop and investigate possible solutions to these complex problems.

We quickly learned that we also needed to involve teachers because they are the educators who work most closely with students and would be able to test change ideas more directly and rapidly without some of the competing priorities that absorb school leaders' attention.

To accomplish this, we added a teacher fellowship for middle and high school teachers during the 2020-21 school year. We created a collaborative space for an initial group of 21 teachers to engage in similar learning as school administrators and coaches and then run their own investigations into literacy best practices that could make a difference for their students.

In our careers as teachers, we (the authors) both had experienced one-shot professional development that scarcely made an impression. With the Baltimore Secondary Literacy Improvement Community teacher fellowship, we wanted to avoid that all-too-common trend, and we aimed to build a structure that would embody the principles of high-quality professional learning.

In particular, we focused on creating a collaborative approach to ongoing learning that elevated teachers'

expertise and voice. In our experience, teachers value opportunities to drive their own growth, and we wanted to support their development as improvers — professionals who can investigate a system, develop research-based change ideas, and implement iterations of those change ideas, paying close attention to evidence of their success and areas in need of adaptation.

In just a few short years, this fellowship has made tangible differences. Teachers have discovered how to help students improve their reading skills and students are reading more fluently and successfully. Middle school students taught by our teacher fellows were able to, on average, double their fluency percentile according to national norms. In addition, we saw greater-than-expected improvements in reading scores among 6th and 7th graders: Students of the Baltimore Secondary Literacy Improvement Community teachers grew an average of five points more on the i-Ready reading assessment than other students in the district.

TEACHERS DRIVING IMPROVEMENT IDEAS

Literacy coaches advertised the fellowship at their school sites and made recommendations of teachers who had a curiosity for more deeply exploring the system of secondary literacy. Recommended teachers went through a two-step application process: First, applicants submitted a resume and letter of interest, then they participated in a panel interview. The initial group of 26 participating practitioners, each of whom received a stipend, represented 13 middle and high schools. The fellowship has continued to grow, retaining about 80% of its participants from year to year — during the 2022-23 school year, there are 41 participants across 19 schools.

The original group of fellows was divided into five smaller groups, with each group investigating a discrete area of instruction: phonics, fluency, vocabulary, writing, and student engagement in the virtual learning environment (because school operations had now been thrown into a chaotic new world by the COVID-19 pandemic).

Teachers meet every two weeks to learn together, develop evidence-based ideas to test out in their classrooms, reflect on their learning with their network community, share ideas about what's working, and brainstorm solutions to problems. Above all, they investigate their own classroom practices in a disciplined way to understand whether the changes they try out are, in fact, improvements.

In this structure, they learn how to conduct PDSA (plan-do-study-act) cycles. They also learn from literacy experts about how to support their students' growth. For example, teachers in the fluency group were able to map out step-by-step protocols for fluency instruction with the guidance of reading expert David Liben.

Because the fellowship is ongoing, we continually bring in just-in-time learning as teachers' strategies evolve. For example, in April 2022, Tim Rasinski, professor of literacy education at Kent State University, spoke to the fluency group about ways to add in more effective comprehension support.

Teachers are engaged in cycles of constant iteration and adaptation to understand how improvement occurs across different classroom contexts. For example, fellows who teach English learner students adapted their fluency routines to include more intensive vocabulary instruction. A reading intervention teacher combined aspects of several fluency routines to build students' skills over the course of a week. A high school chemistry teacher

figured out the parts of the fluency routine that are important to emphasize with students who only see her every other day.

Over time, fellows start to see themselves as researchers, able to adjust their practices in response to their classroom experiences, then share what they have learned with all the other teachers. Because fellows are encouraged — indeed, expected — to make adaptations to the baseline ideas in response to data, teachers own their improvement more than they do when given someone else's program to use.

A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO DATA

A crucial component of the fellowship is its focus on the practical use of day-to-day classroom data. We have all heard the call to be data-driven or data-informed in our practice, but, too often, school and district leaders pay little attention to presenting data in a way that empowers teachers to take meaningful action.

For example, we spend a lot of time packaging the results of monthly assessments (DIBELS 8 oral reading fluency) in a way that allows teachers to reflect on the variations they are seeing among their students and connect these variations to their specific classroom practices.

This feels very different to our teachers than the usual review of standardized test scores. As Brian Snook, a middle school English language arts teacher, says, "This is a way of documenting and tracking the data so that you can have data-driven improvement, and it gives you solid evidence of what worked and didn't work. Even when it doesn't work, you have evidence of why it didn't work."

Beyond assessments of learning, teacher fellows collect two other types of data to inform their decision-making: implementation data and student empathy interview data, which they document in a standardized Google spreadsheet. The implementation data helps teachers

learn about what's working.

They document what they are able to do: How many days were you able to implement a fluency routine? How long did it take? Which students were absent during those times? From the first time reading a curriculum passage to the fourth time, how much faster and more accurately did your students read it?

"This is a different type of data than I've used in the past," says Jessica Harrington, a middle school English learner intervention teacher. "These small pieces of data give us more insight into a student's needs than the standardized scores because it is real-time data. We can adapt and change to meet the needs of students as we monitor their progress each week."

Teachers regularly check in with their students through empathy interviews — in-depth conversations focused on how the students are experiencing changes in their learning. They ask them about their confidence as readers, their feelings about the monthly assessments, the learning they take with them to other classes, and many other things. This kind of conversation can help us remember to put students' perspectives at the center and design improvements with them, rather than imposing new strategies on them.

Gina Le, a former high school English teacher and fellow, says, "Being more intentional about listening to students and collaborating on the process of learning and trying new ideas made me slow down and not jump into solutions, which was valuable for addressing student needs." She added that she wishes she had conducted empathy interviews more often.

Over time, examining these data sources helps teachers learn to give more ownership of the improvement process to their students. For example, Seth Hamrick, a middle school English language arts teacher, had a couple of options in mind for how to structure his students' personalized learning

time, but he knew that he should talk to his students about what would work best for them before deciding on a one-size-fits-all plan.

"I allowed them to choose from two options — independent reading or blended learning with an online platform," Hamrick says. "I recorded at the start of the trimester who is doing which activity and will track any trends or differences in their data at the midyear reading assessment. My intention is to have students look at that data as well and make decisions about what they will do for their independent work for the rest of the year."

When teachers like Hamrick can share the ownership of the improvement process with students, it will lead to a more equitable improvement journey. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford, associate professor at Clemson University, said it best in her February 2022 appearance on the High Tech High *Unboxed* podcast: "The users have more to give you than to help you define the problem. And there requires a significant amount of humility in the sharing of power for the improvement process to be equitable."

A COMMUNITY THAT LEARNS FROM FAILURE

This work is not always a linear process. As leaders of the teacher fellowship, we constantly repeat the continuous improvement mantra that what we are doing is "possibly wrong and definitely incomplete." We do this to break down the mental barrier that schools' cultures of accountability pose to trying new things. We want to open up a space where everyone understands that failure is necessary as we learn our way to more equitable learning experiences and outcomes for students.

Opening up this space is crucial for teachers to view their profession with a growth mindset instead of feeling they have to project an aura of unrelenting success to their leaders. When teachers have a growth mindset, they persist

through the initial difficulties that come with trying new instructional techniques, leading to greater long-term success.

The network structure of the fellowship creates a sense of belonging to a community of improvers, which reduces barriers to trying something new. Teachers feel they are learning from the struggles of those who have come before them and who learn alongside them. Snook says, "Collaborating every other week was helpful, especially getting ideas of what was working for others. It was especially helpful to collaborate when things didn't work. I was worried I would be the only one struggling, but it helped to see others struggling and learning what works and doesn't work."

And, because teachers are always bringing their results back to the rest of the fellowship, they multiply their learning by spreading good ideas. As Hamrick says, "[Baltimore Secondary Literacy Improvement Community] is an opportunity to improve my individual practice, but also an opportunity for being part of something larger. It's really compelling to be part of something that could impact other classrooms in the city."

English learner interventionist Erin Lowry has introduced PDSA cycles to her school's team of 17 English learner teachers, building, as she puts

it, "teacher buy-in, choice, and agency for improvement investigations of their own" beyond her own practice.

IMPACT ON TEACHER PRACTICE

We have found that the teacher fellowship structure promotes teacher growth by giving teachers ownership over their content learning, empowering them to use data that is meaningful to the decisions they must make for their students, and cultivating a growth mindset around their teaching practice.

This is important not only for the teachers themselves, but also for promoting the narrative of teachers as highly capable professionals who, when given the right tools and the space to inquire, can take charge of their own professional learning.

Many of our teacher fellows are applying the principles of continuous improvement learned in the Baltimore Secondary Literacy Improvement Community to other areas of their practice. For instance, high school teacher Matt Edelman has applied what he has learned not only to literacy instruction but also to classroom routines, such as the tool for students to self-monitor their focus levels described at the beginning of this article.

Erica Robbins, a middle school English language arts teacher, is also committed to tracking and using data outside of the fellowship: "I

now see the value in capturing data immediately because I can get a clear picture of student progress, pacing, and frequency. I am able to give immediate feedback, track student growth to better determine small groups and scaffolds, and reflect on how to improve writing instruction."

Our experiences with the teacher fellowship have helped us understand how we can improve student achievement by taking a continuous improvement approach that puts teachers in the driver's seat. This approach helps teachers embrace the mindset of persisting through early failures. They no longer expect new ideas to lead to immediate improvement but know that, with effort and an inquiry stance, they can succeed.

As Matt Edelman puts it, "Trying to do small things well and measure them carefully and open up about challenges is super powerful. Once you move from the mindset of accountability to growth, everything begins to shift. It's a whole different ballgame."

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Coaching empowers teachers to lead for equity

BY COURTNEY SMITH

"So where are we taking the team next?" I asked the three teacher leaders in my weekly coaching meeting at a large middle school in Brooklyn, New York. In addition to their roles teaching science, English learners, and English language arts, these dedicated educators were fellows in an improvement network. They committed to learn together and then lead their peers in a cross-content grade team through an equity-centered continuous improvement process to better meet the needs of historically marginalized students.

In a more traditional instructional coaching model at times employed

in our district, New York City Public Schools, the role of a coach would be to prepare for and lead the team meetings, talk through next steps, and visit classrooms to offer encouragement and feedback on teacher practice. Instead, my coaching focused most deeply on building fellows' leadership capacity. At this weekly fellows meeting, I coached and supported them to facilitate the team meetings and build buy-in with their own teams of their peers.

This type of coaching occurs as part of the NYC Continuous Learning Multilingual Learner Network, which is composed of 33 New York City middle schools working together to strengthen support and outcomes for Black and Latinx multilingual learners who experience the impact of poverty.

Leveraging the tools of improvement science, these schools work with coaches to dig into the root causes of problems, explore student data through an equity lens, and run rapid plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles across classrooms. Throughout the year, fellows come together to share their learning, successes, and stumbling points with one another to accelerate learning and impact for our focus students.

Network coaches, hired from district offices to support the network schools, are dedicated full time to building and strengthening relationships with participating fellows, school leaders, and team members, with a focus on building fellows' capacity to be leaders for equity in their schools. By supporting them to grow their ability and confidence to lead — and not just participate in — equity-centered

improvement work, the coaching structure amplifies the schools' ability to disrupt inequities for Black and Latinx multilingual learners.

The results are encouraging. For example, in the 2020 school year, multilingual learner students whose teachers participated in the network improved over four times more than their multilingual peers on the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test.

A DEDICATED, FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO COACHING

To support the growth of equity-centered teacher leadership, network coaches are committed to the following structures and principles.

Set the scene with professional learning. Each year, all fellows in the network engage in a tailored professional learning series to meet their individual needs. In their first year, new fellows (two per school) move through an introductory series, Improvement Science Foundations, through which they learn about and practice with the tools of improvement science.

During this series, fellows come together across school sites to center on the "why" of the network's focus on strengthening support for Black and Latinx multilingual students who have been historically underserved. They also reflect on connections between the network's shared "why" and their own "why" as educators.

Here, new fellows work with improvement science tools for the first time. They apply the tools to a fictional problem of practice in a fictional school because this creates

freedom and space to learn about the tools themselves before applying them to the complex systems of their own multifaceted school communities.

Graduating from the series, fellows co-lead a team of their peers through applying the improvement science tools to a school-defined problem of practice on better meeting the needs of their Black and Latinx multilingual students, with their network coach's support.

In their second and third years, veteran fellows engage in a three-part series, the Leadership Institute, focused on supporting them in growing their equity-centered leadership capacities. Here, fellows explore the four "I's" of oppression (internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological oppression) as described by Darnisa Amante-Jackson (Brooks, 2022), founder of the Disruptive Equity Education Project, and how they live out in their students' and their own experiences in schools. Fellows also use a leadership self-assessment tool to ground and deepen their equity-centered leadership skill sets.

Prioritize coaching time with teacher leaders. Meeting with the fellows regularly is key to supporting their development as reflective equity-centered practitioners. During these meetings, coaches and fellows celebrate successes, explore adaptive challenges that have arisen (or are on the horizon in the next phase of improvement work), and action plan together.

Calendars get crazy, school life is hectic, and fire drills happen, but coaches and fellows work together to hold this time sacred. They commit to being flexible to make it happen,

whether it's during the school day in a prep period or before or after school so they can reflect on the last whole team meeting, plan their upcoming work with their teacher teams, and tackle challenges and growth areas together.

Deepen relationships and reflection with a flexible coaching scope and sequence. The coaching structure relies on a foundation of trust between teacher leaders and coaches. To help foster a trusting space of transparency, vulnerability, and risk-taking, the network uses a flexible coaching scope and sequence that prioritizes relationship-building and mutual reflection in the first two months of the year.

Coaches and fellows engage in personal reflections on their own experiences in school (as students and as teachers) through the lens of racial and linguistic equity before using the formal tools of continuous improvement. They take time to get to know one another and share values, experiences, and where each person is on their equity journey.

As fellows learn more about their coaches' and their own experiences, coaches capture invaluable data and insights on their experiences, strengths, and expertise. This relationship building helps get everyone ready to dive into the deep and sometimes challenging elements of equity-centered improvement work together. As one network coach said, "I think that the relationship building that we did, and the more explicit conversations that we tried to have, and activities that we had around exploring our own biases … set me, as a coach, and my teams up better to be having that kind of reflective stance throughout the year."

Gradually release responsibility to teacher leaders. Network coaches' goal is to "coach ourselves out of a job." Coaches move from co-leaders of the team's student-centered improvement work to thought partners to cheerleaders as fellows increasingly drive the work. While coaches often take the lead on planning the fellows-

only weekly coaching meeting in the first few months of network participation, coaches make strategic decisions around when and how to share the coaching scope and sequence with fellows, engaging them as co-pilots and eventually independent leaders of the work.

With veteran fellows, coaches often start the year by walking through the coaching scope and sequence and engaging fellows in a reflective planning process: What parts of the yearlong sequence do they anticipate might be challenging? What parts do they think they'll shine in? How can their coach support them in each of these areas? Coaches dig deep to identify areas for fellows to continue to grow and tailor ways to support them in furthering their independent leadership.

As an example of how this gradual release works, during a September coaching meeting of a team's third year in the network, I asked three veteran fellows what things I had done in the previous year that supported the teacher team in making a difference for our Black and Latinx multilingual students.

They reflected and shared that they especially valued the "equity pause" that I often brought into the meeting — a question peppered into the team activities to slow us down and reflect on where and how our work or language was either disrupting or reinforcing the status quo for our students. They found this kept us all centered and moving in the right direction.

I thanked them for their reflection and then told them that I would no longer be leading the equity pauses during team meetings. Instead, they would practice using this structure themselves, with my support. We would use our coaching time together to plan for how they could lead the equity pauses, practice, and unpack how it went. The fellows were nervous, but we talked through why this transition was important for their long-term work with their own teams, how I would gradually release this responsibility to them, and how they

could signal when they needed extra support.

Celebrate and encourage teacher leaders' creativity and expertise. Just as we encourage our students to bring their experiences, cultures, languages, and gifts to the classroom, we must create spaces for teacher leaders to bring their own flavor to their leadership and take risks.

Our network believes that teacher leaders are creative powerhouses. They are constantly finding ways to engage students, make content exciting and relevant, differentiate support, and create inclusive and joyful classrooms. Coaches celebrate these skills and invite fellows to put their own twist on their leadership. We don't want to get stuck in believing there is a single way to lead equity-centered improvement work. In fact, it is this kind of false binary thinking that keeps the inequitable status quo in place across our systems.

By building and holding spaces where teacher leaders are encouraged to bring their full, creative, and multifaceted selves to the work, coaches help foster experiences for educators that model the kind of inclusive, transparent, and joyful collaboration that we want our Black and Latinx multilingual learners to experience in the classroom each day.

THE COACHING MODEL IN ACTION

What does this coaching approach look like in action? Here's an example of how coaches' work with fellows builds their capacity to support their teacher teams to move toward more equitable practices.

During a fellows' coaching meeting, three fellows and I reviewed the team's work to date and how they could go deeper in their equity practices. As we talked about how things were going, I noticed that the fellows' comments about students seemed deficit-focused. I posed a question to guide our reflection: Are we talking about problems with what students can do or what adults can do?

The fellows started examining the

possible causes they had articulated for why our target students were not yet performing to their potential, then stopped. They recognized that the statements were almost all about students — what students could and couldn't do, or what they needed. We talked through that observation and whether it aligned with our commitment to putting the onus of change on us as educators, not on students and families. We decided that it didn't.

Rather than scrapping our first draft, we revised it. Each fellow took a single statement from our draft of possible causes and reframed it from using student deficit language to centering on adults and the challenges we might face in fully meeting our students' needs. Statements such as "multilingual students need more processing time" became "teachers are unsure how to structure protocols for think time in a meaningful way."

Next, I invited the fellows to think about how they would facilitate this conversation with their teams, and I asked how they wanted their teams and themselves to feel. "Like we're in this together and like this isn't hopeless — that we can make a difference for our students," one experienced fellow said. Setting that as our north star, we talked through facilitation moves and practiced how to introduce the reframing activity.

We built an agenda for how the fellows would lead the full teacher team through reflection and revision. Just as our coaching team had intended, fellows assumed leadership. One fellow offered to model how to shift from writing about "them" to writing about "us" and share her reflection on how she felt when seeing the new version. Another offered to facilitate our team meeting "energizer" activity.

But the fellows decided they weren't ready to lead this activity independently with their teams, so we planned for me to join them virtually. That way, I'd be able to listen in on the team meeting and have a better understanding of how the team was engaging in the activities, but they would be in charge. The fellows planned to use the chat feature with me, popping in their questions in real time for support (and cheerleading) from me.

The fellows left this planning meeting with a completed agenda, reflective forethinking on where adaptive challenges might arise and how they could leverage their strengths to navigate them, and an understanding of where and how they could get support. They were well on their way to the kind of leadership their schools needed them to take for equity-centered improvement.

BUILDING A SYSTEM OF EQUITY-CENTERED LEADERS

Making adaptive change in the interest of equity is complex. It can't happen from the outside in because it requires a deep and ongoing commitment among the educators doing the work with students every day. But support to build that knowledge and capacity among school-based staff is essential, and coaching can play a powerful role.

As one fellow put it: "The equity piece of our work wasn't fully connecting for me yet. I wasn't sure how to apply it to our cycles. It's such a big term, and it's so important. Now I see how the pieces fit together. We're not just talking about it, we're working together to make equity happen." In this way, the NYC Continuous Learning Multilingual Learner Network is helping to transform learning not just for individual students but for schools and the system as a whole.

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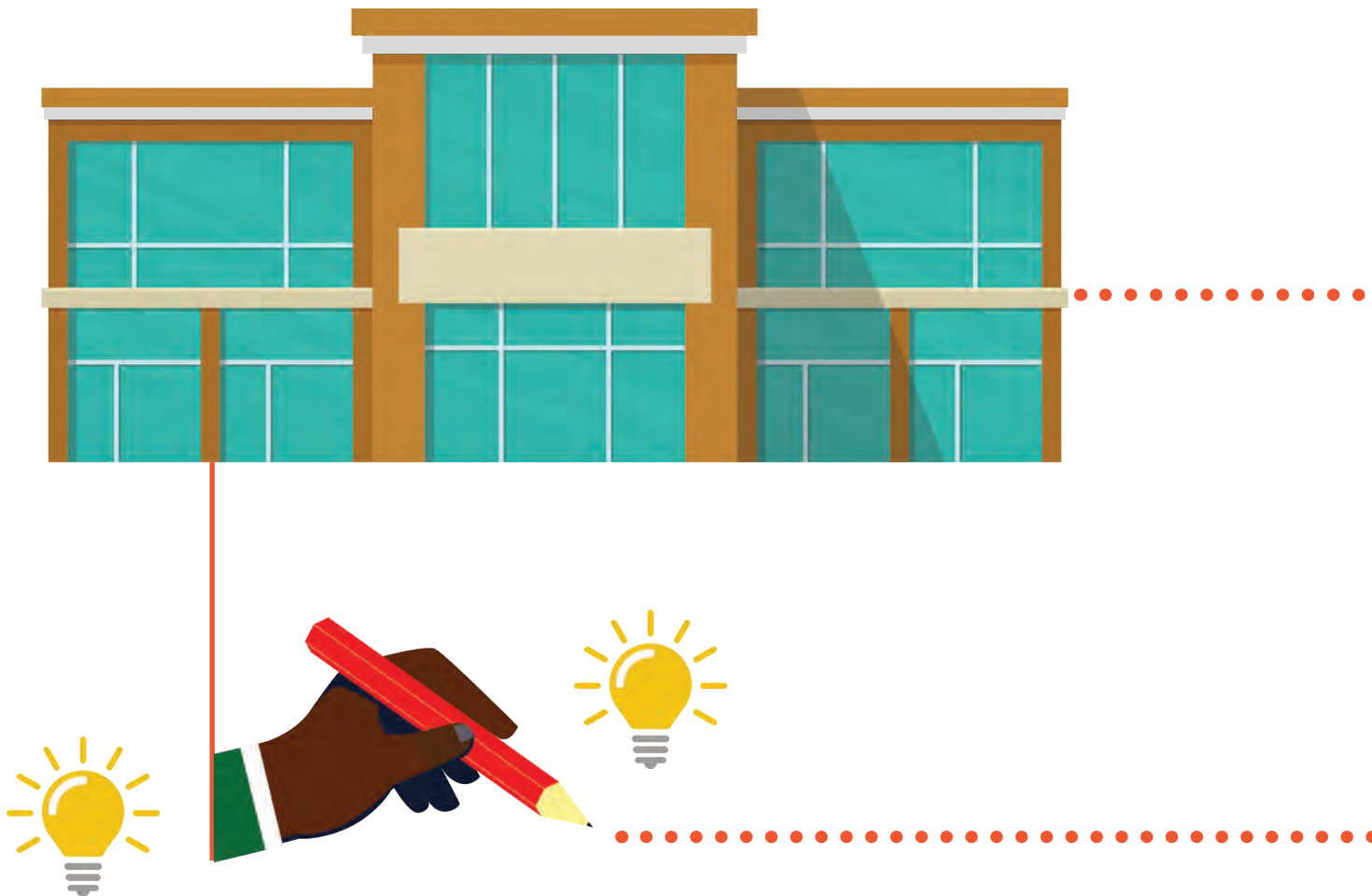
Good ideas spread when schools learn from each other

BY STACEY CAILLIER AND SOFIA TANNENHAUS

Tom Gaines leaned over his lunch plate, listening intently to two recent graduates from High Tech High International in San Diego, California, who were now enrolled in college. He wanted to know how their high school had supported them in applying to and enrolling in college.

An educator at a neighboring high school, Gaines figured that if he could learn what had worked at High Tech High International, a school that had achieved strikingly high enrollment in four-year colleges for traditionally underrepresented students, he could work with his colleagues to integrate similar ideas at their school. Like High Tech High International, Gaines'

school served large percentages of students of color and those experiencing poverty and was aiming to increase their rates of college enrollment and graduation.

In between bites of falafel and hummus, the first-generation students talked enthusiastically about the one-on-one meetings they had with their school's college advisor to craft a
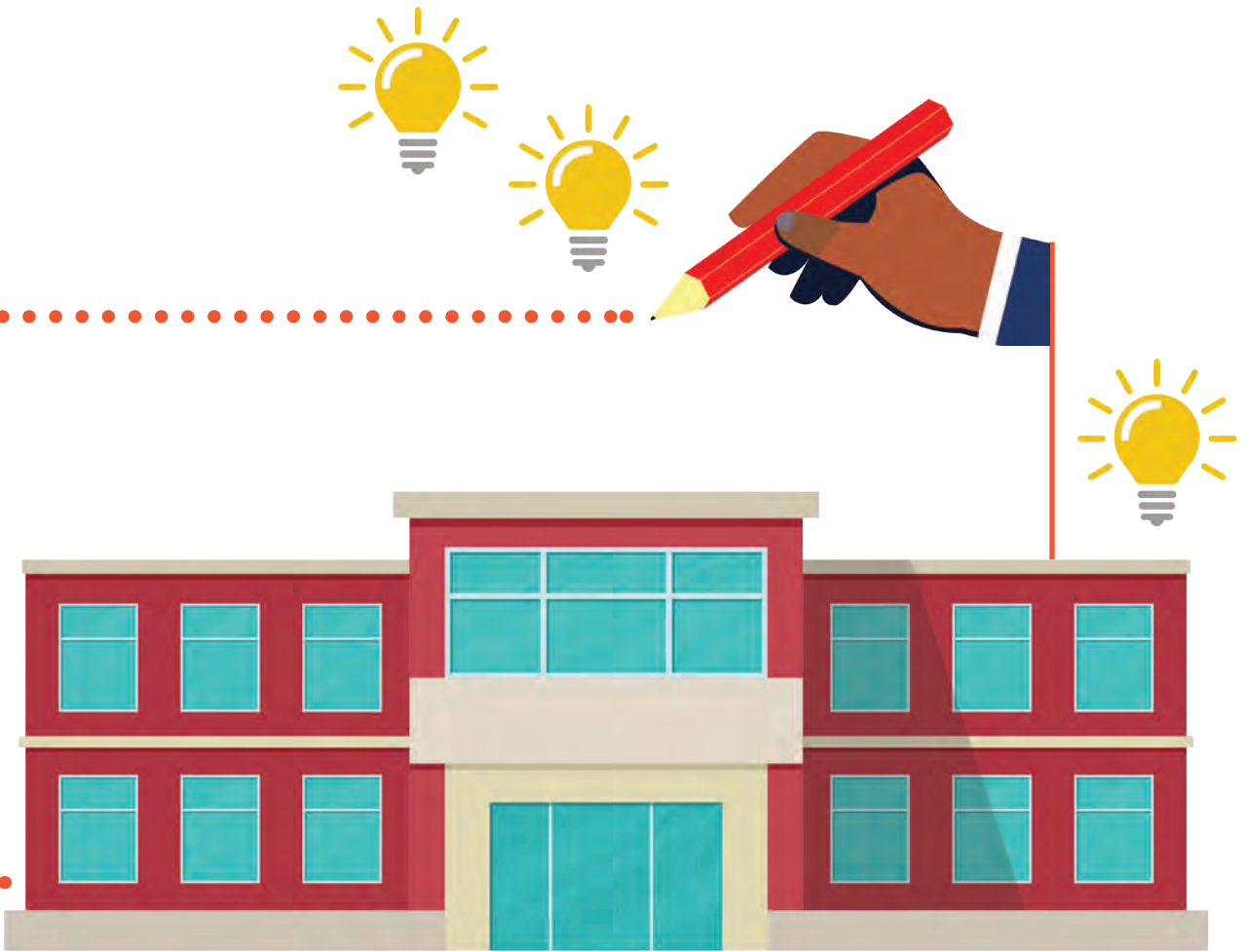
balanced list of college options. They talked about their 12th-grade math teacher, who made sure that every student completed a finance project in class so they could see college as a financial reality and who dedicated class time to helping students complete Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Dream Act applications.

They also described school-sponsored college campus visits throughout their four years of high school, a daylong event for seniors that provided real-time support to submit their applications, and the campus visits they took once they had decided where to enroll. They explained the many opportunities they had to talk about their fears and challenges on the path to college and how teachers and counselors had helped students address them.

Using an active listening approach called an empathy interview, Gaines asked questions and took copious notes, preparing to share what he had learned with colleagues. He was especially struck by what the students described as a system of supports, not a single strategy, for improving college access. As he finished his lunch, he prepared to meet with a team from his school and from High Tech High International to share his observations and discuss how they might adopt or adapt some of the school's ideas.

Gaines and his colleagues were participating in a "live case," a way for teams of professionals to learn from what's working in one another's contexts. Both High Tech High International and Gaines' school are part of the CARPE College Access Network, a coalition of 30 schools across Southern California working to ensure that more students who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or experiencing poverty apply to and enroll in colleges where they are most likely to graduate.

The network includes school site teams composed of school counselors, teachers, administrators, and students. We (the authors of this article) are part of the network hub team, which provides support to those team members to use continuous improvement processes in their work.

The live case is one way we connect schools in the network to learn with and from each other.

LEARNING WHAT WORKS

In a recent workshop we attended, Lloyd Provost, an expert in improvement science in the health care field, said the purpose of networks is to learn from variation. The idea is that, in any network, there will be people or organizations getting different results. If you can learn what is working, and what is not, in different contexts, you can harness the power of the collective to understand "what works for whom, under what conditions" and spread good ideas. As educators, we have long valued networks for this purpose.

But a couple of years into CARPE, our hub team read *Shattering Inequities* by Robin Avelar La Salle & Ruth S. Johnson (2019). In it, they talk about how the very existence of "bright spots" — or positive outliers in the data — undermines the pursuit of equity. If there are "bright spots," by definition there are spots that are less bright, which means not everyone is being served well. "A star does not a constellation make," the authors write.

As leaders for equity, we cannot be content to have a few brightly shining stars. We do this work because we want to create more consistently reliable and equitable systems, where a student's experiences and outcomes are not dependent on which school or class they attend, let alone the color of their skin or their family's socioeconomic status.

We would add to Provost's statement that the purpose of learning from variation is to create constellations. That is the philosophy that guides our network: If we set up meaningful opportunities for schools and educators to learn from each other, we can discover how to become a constellation of shining stars for all of our students.

Around the same time that we read *Shattering Inequities*, one of us interviewed Don Berwick for the High Tech High *Unboxed* podcast (Caillier, 2021). Berwick, former president of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, has launched and supported multiple collaborative networks focused on improving critical processes in health care and patient outcomes. He described a live case as a promising structure to reduce variation across a system by having hospitals learn from those in the system that are getting the best results.

Inspired by the success of live cases in health care, we adopted the approach with our network of schools.

HOW TO CONDUCT A LIVE CASE

In a live case, visiting teams spend a few hours at a host team school, learning what the host does to get positive results. For the live case described above, Gaines' school team was visiting High Tech High International to learn more about the school's success in helping traditionally underrepresented students get to four-year colleges.

Visiting team members talk to educators, students, and alumni and, when possible, they also observe the host team's processes in action. For example, during one live case we facilitated, the visiting team attended college application workshops in senior English classes and talked with students and faculty about them.

After this data gathering, the visiting team shares findings with the host team in the form of celebrations, noticings, wonderings, and its own learnings, and the host team has a chance to reflect and ask questions. The goal of this approach is reciprocal learning, where each team is adding value to the other's work.

The visiting team not only comes away with new ideas to try, but also helps the host team gain insight into what parts of the process are working well and where the team might improve. We close with a debrief of the process and sharing of takeaways or implications for our own work.

The host team and visiting team then become a teaching team that shares with the whole network so that good ideas can spread. In CARPE, the teaching teams present and interact with other network members during network convenings. They model how to learn about and translate high-leverage practices from one context to another and highlight the details that allow people to turn good ideas into reality.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS

Here are some of the lessons we've learned about making live cases as productive as possible.

Get clear on the process you want to improve. To identify a process that is critical to the outcomes you care most about, it is helpful to look at data across the network or district and identify where there is large variation. Across CARPE, we saw significant variation in student enrollment in four-year colleges so we decided to focus on the process of supporting students to apply to four-year colleges, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that students apply to colleges with high graduation rates.

Identify who is getting great results and invite them to be the host team. When we looked at data, High Tech High International emerged as particularly successful in sending students who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or experiencing poverty to colleges with high predicted graduation rates. We also knew that the school's team would see the live case as an opportunity to learn and improve its own process as it had consistently demonstrated curiosity and humility, a commitment to reflect and learn from data, and a pattern of following through on action steps.

Choose a visiting team. We find it helpful to choose a visiting team that shares a similar context to the host team (e.g., similar student demographics, similar size, same district). This helps teams avoid the common "well, we can't do that at our school" excuse because the host team is like them and getting substantially better results.

In this selection process, we encourage organizers to avoid two

temptations. First, you may be tempted to look at your data and identify the team or school with the poorest results on the outcome or process you care about. But remember that it's important for the visiting team members to be curious, open to new ideas, and willing to be vulnerable about the ways their current process is not working for the students they most want to serve.

Before inviting the team with the poorest results, consider: Is the team getting those results because it does not embody those characteristics of a learning stance? Is there another team that is more open to learning and still has room to grow?

Second, you may be tempted to invite lots of teams to visit. However, the teams that participated in our live cases appreciated the intimacy that keeping it small provided. They felt more willing to ask detailed questions and share their own fears or challenges. It was often in these moments where the richest dialogue happened.

For example, when Gaines said that some teachers at his school were reluctant to offer class time and assign credit for completing the FAFSA application because it was unrelated to course content, High Tech High International's 12th-grade math teacher responded with an impassioned reflection on how his thinking had evolved on this topic. He also said that he doesn't penalize students who don't complete the application.

This level of nuanced discussion about how the process worked helped Gaines and his colleagues reconsider the strategy. This kind of detailed conversation tends to be easier when people have the time, space, and sense of intimacy to get into the details together.

Communicate the purpose and norms. Once we brought together the host and visiting teams, we grounded ourselves in our shared purpose, the outcome data, and some shared commitments for how we wanted to show up for each other. One of those

norms, which we adopted from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, "all teach, all learn," sets the expectation that no one knows everything, and together we know a lot. We also invite participants to embrace norms about vulnerability, curiosity, getting into the details together, and sharing the air.

"Give people each other." Joe McCannon, co-founder of the Billions Institute and previously with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, talks often about the importance of not just giving people tools for change, but also "giving people each other" — that is, cultivating space to connect as human beings and learners. We dedicate time and effort to building relationships and providing opportunities for dialogue throughout the process, from the launch to the debrief.

Don't skip the teaching team component. The power of the live case is not just in the peer-to-peer learning that happens between the host team and visiting team, but in them coming together to spread effective practices to the rest of the network. To facilitate that process, CARPE uses a structure called spotlight sessions that we adapted from New Visions for Public Schools in which all network members interact with the teaching team around the promising strategies.

In the past, we had often defaulted to structures where everyone gets to share, often in small groups. This helped build a learning culture, but didn't allow for the most promising ideas to rise to the top and spread quickly — in other words, it didn't build the constellation we were aiming for.

Moreover, data we collect about the functioning of our network shows that, after we began conducting the spotlight sessions, members felt more connected to people in other teams, felt they had more voice in the direction of the network, and were implementing ideas from the sessions.

LEARNING IN COMMUNITY

In our experience at CARPE, live

cases are benefitting everyone involved — visiting teams, host teams, other network members, and ultimately, students.

For example, a college advisor from one visiting team explained that the experience gave her direct insight into opportunities that High Tech High International is providing its students. This enabled her school's team to create similar programming that fits the school's culture and student needs.

Another outcome is an increased sense of community through a shared purpose. Tom Gaines said that the live case reaffirmed that "we're all in this journey together and we're doing courageous, amazing work on behalf of kids who may need champions in their lives."

At the end of the day, we know the real learning happens in community — for young people and adults — and that it is especially powerful when we have moments to get outside of our own bubbles. Connecting educators to each other through live cases and publicly sharing their learning is a systematic way of learning from variation, nurturing curiosity and humility, and spreading good ideas. All are essential in our collective work to design more equitable systems for students and each other.

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THINKING ROUTINES

help educators develop an equity lens

BY RACHEL BELLO, TARIMA LEVINE, AND MATTY LAU

The phrase "educational equity" is a common one in schools today, but it can mean many things to many people, leading to a lack of clarity about where and how educators can best focus their energies. In spring 2022, the continuous improvement team at the Bank Street Education Center (the Ed Center) set out to articulate what it means to "center equity" in our work with school districts and how to ensure that we do so consistently.

We have identified a series of thinking routines that we use regularly to infuse equity-mindedness into our work. These thinking routines help us ensure that we prioritize equity during the project design, implementation, and formative evaluation of our improvement efforts. This article describes how we embed those routines in the tools and approaches we use in coaching for continuous improvement and shares early insights about how they are helping.

OUR APPROACH

A commitment to equity has been a long-standing core value of the Bank Street College of Education. Since its inception in 1916, Bank Street has focused on improving the education of all children and their teachers by applying all available knowledge about learning and growth and connecting teaching and learning meaningfully to the outside world. Today, the Ed Center is the arm of the institution that partners with school systems around

Continuous improvement: Thinking routines that place equity at the center

UNPACK BIASES
Unpack and challenge assumptions and biases

LOOK HOLISTICALLY
Look for more complete stories and holistic pictures of students and adults

HONOR HUMANITY
Honor the full humanity of students and adults

CONSIDER POWER
Consider how power and privilege influence interactions and relationships

DISRUPT RACISM
Intentionally acknowledge and disrupt systemic and structural oppression by race

Bank Street Education Center

the U.S. to collaborate on educational improvement.

The Ed Center's goal is to disrupt inequity and design better learning experiences for everyone — students, families, and school and district leaders — but especially for those who have been historically marginalized by traditional schooling in America. We do this critical work by partnering closely with stakeholders at every layer of the system.

As we reflected on our work with schools and districts, we at the Ed Center noticed some key equity-oriented features that were critical for relationships between school professionals and students, as well as between school professionals. These reflections were informed by our reading about and exploration of equity, especially from notable works by Elena Aguilar (2020) and Glenn Singleton (2014).

Out of these reflections, we developed the following five thinking routines to embed in our work to help us and our school partners apply an equity lens.

1. **Unpack biases:** We consistently examine and challenge our assumptions and biases and those of our partners. This means that we consider our racial and social identities and how our identities may influence our thinking or our approach to instruction.

2. **Look holistically:** We look for complete stories and holistic pictures of what is happening for students, teachers, and leaders. This requires us to take an inquiry stance in all elements of our partnerships.

3. **Honor humanity:** We strive to make sure we are honoring the full humanity of our students (and the adults we partner with) in all of our work and conversations. This means the "whole child" is centered in our work — not just their grades or their behaviors, but their entire identities.

4. **Consider power:** We consider how power and privilege influence interactions and relationships, drawing on our reflections about our own social identities.

5. **Disrupt racism:** We intentionally acknowledge and work to disrupt systemic and structural oppression by race. This means we question districtwide policies — for example, those on grading, tracking, and discipline — that disproportionately impact specific groups of children or families for reasons beyond their control or that result from decades of systemic exclusion and oppression.
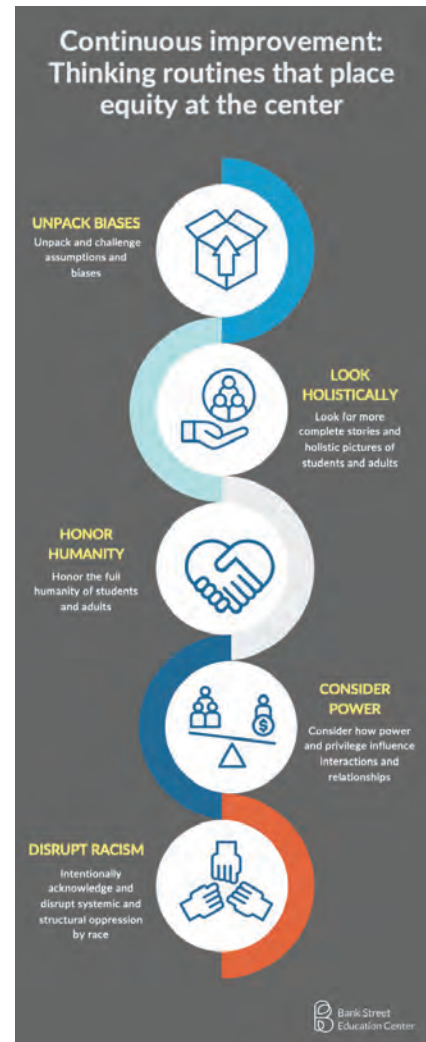
TWO NETWORKS, ONE CHARGE

The Ed Center applies these thinking routines with two New York-based improvement networks in Yonkers and Brooklyn. The Yonkers Public Schools Network for School Improvement began in 2018 with Yonkers, a city about 30 minutes north of New York City. Initially, the network consisted of 10 schools and expanded in 2020 to include all 23 Yonkers schools that serve 7th and 8th graders. The Brooklyn South Network for School Improvement launched in 2020. This network comprises 11 New York City public schools across Districts 17 and 18 in the southern part of Brooklyn.

Schools in both networks are working to address a common, deep-seated injustice: Due to systemic factors beyond their control, students who are Black, Latinx, or experiencing poverty are disproportionately underprepared for success in upper-level mathematics courses. Accordingly, our overall goal is to increase the percentage of students from these groups who are on track for success in high school mathematics by the end of 8th grade.

We support both networks in their continuous improvement work via all-network meetings, school-based coaching, school leader meetings, and district strategy meetings. In Brooklyn, we have also established a cadre of teacher continuous improvement leaders who meet regularly to inform the design of our program and build teacher leadership capacity.

At the heart of this work are plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles, a structure for identifying a problem of practice, designing and implementing a change idea to address it, studying and reflecting on the results, and making modifications to improve on the change idea. (See the figure on p. 41.)

In this work, we have found that the thinking routines are critical in maintaining an open dialogue with practitioners that consciously centers students and race. Without deliberately making these elements a part of each phase of the repeated PDSA cycle, that critical and sometimes necessarily uncomfortable conversation can get pushed aside.

What follows are a few examples of how we apply the thinking routines in our network facilitation. Rather than being isolated strategies, the thinking routines work together in integrated ways, and so we describe them in tandem. We focus on the first four thinking routines because these emerge most readily in our coaching work with school teams. While all our work is ultimately designed to disrupt systemic inequities, the fifth thinking routine shows up more often in our larger-scale work with district partners.

Identify student needs and strengths.

Before school teams engage in running plan-do-study-act cycles, we invite each team member to select three to five focus students to follow throughout the year. This provides network members with an initial way to determine if the change idea is leading to improvement, and if so, for whom and under what conditions. Teachers were asked to select students who identify as Black, Latinx, or experiencing poverty, score C or below in math, consistently attend class, and could potentially benefit greatly from additional attention in math class.

However, we are mindful that educators engaged in this process could risk falling into a deficit mindset about what these students can do or who they are. We want to reinforce that students are more than just the challenges they face or the grades they are not (yet) receiving.

To help educators shift from associating children with largely deficit-oriented criteria to seeing them as whole human beings, we ask network members to consider what they have learned about their focus students — either from informal conversations or a more structured empathy interview protocol — to identify and document students' strengths, like "takes risks in class" and "loves to help others."

This activity addresses the first three thinking routines (unpack biases, look holistically, and honor humanity) by pushing the entire network to consider the biases that can surface when we are asked to identify students who need additional support and reminding us of the ways we can build on students' strengths to support them.

Examine data from a place of awareness.

Once teachers select focus students, they begin the process of testing instructional change ideas and collecting data on whether the change had the intended impact on student learning or students' perceptions of the classroom environment. To facilitate studying this

data, our analysts (in cooperation with our coaches) designed an interactive spreadsheet that serves as a way to collect plan-do-study-act cycle data and as a home for the protocols that participants need to collaboratively plan, study, and act on their learnings.

Each teacher has their own individual data page, which is public, so that everyone on the team or in the network can see and reflect on one another's learnings. The data from these individual pages populate a collective team page for each improvement cycle, which serves as an organizing tool to help team members collaborate and make data-informed decisions about next steps. At each phase of the cycle, a short protocol embedded in the workbook guides team discussions and documentation.

Attention to equity is intentionally embedded in the workbook. Specifically, reflection questions and prompts remind teachers to engage in the thinking routines for unpacking biases, looking holistically, and considering power when studying data habits. We also provide explicit guidance so teams remember to use low-inference language when reviewing data, remain user-centered, consider multiple perspectives (especially students'), focus on strengths and improvements among community members early and often, and consider social identities and interrogate biases and beliefs throughout the process.

A study protocol draws on the thinking routines to prompt teachers' reflection. The first two questions in the protocol ask teams: "What patterns do we notice about the students we seem to be serving well as a team?" and "What patterns do we notice about the students we are not reaching yet as an improvement team?"

By asking teachers to consider first the students whom they are "serving well," we gently remind the teacher that they are working on behalf of their students and that they are a gatekeeper to student mastery. The phrase "students we are not reaching yet" is also key. Embedded in the term "yet" is

THE BANK STREET APPROACH: THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROCESS
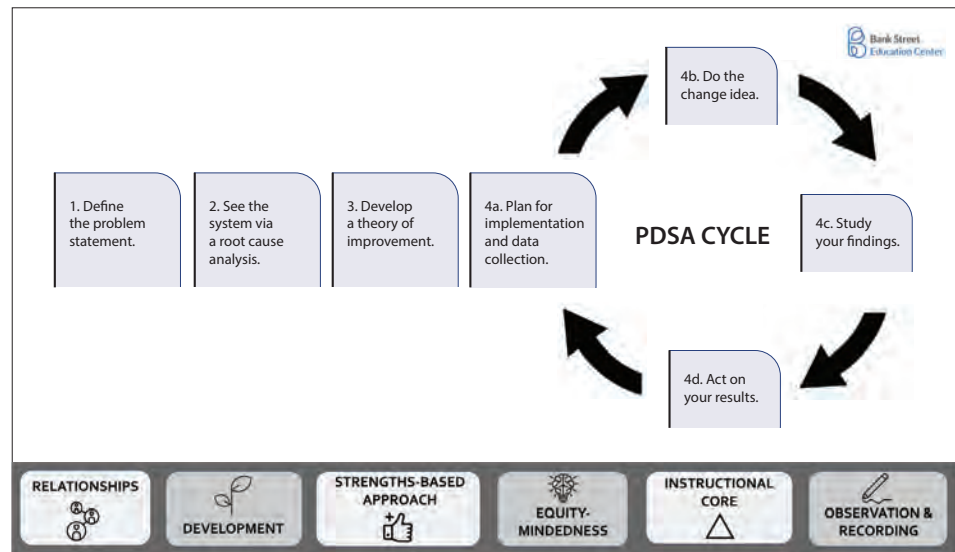
the reminder that all students can learn with the right support, and the teacher is the adult charged with providing those supports. These questions are meant to create the context in which teams can look more holistically at the data patterns and draw more complete stories about what is happening for all of their students.

The study protocol also includes a question that draws attention to how teachers consider the impact of their social identities on their understanding of the data: "Think about your social identities. What assumptions or interpretations might you be making about your team's learnings?" This question is meant to remind teachers that, in many cases, their gender expression, racial identity, or class background may bias the ways in which they interpret data. By identifying and naming these implicit biases and recognizing how they impact our judgment, the network community can take steps toward racial equity one individual and team at a time.

By encouraging participants not to jump to conclusions, we explicitly ask them to unpack their biases while they consider their practice. Considering multiple perspectives and staying strengths-based helps teachers consider the presence of a whole story behind a single data point. This deliberately helps discourage the "these kids can't" deficit-based narrative that can often pervade conversations about teaching students who have been historically underserved.

Reminding teachers that they invariably bring their own social identities to this work also serves as a reminder to consider their power and privilege. Because there is an inherent privilege in teachers examining students' performance, a power dynamic exists any time we look at data. We need to wield that power thoughtfully, empathetically, and equitably if we are to help students (and their teachers) improve.

DISRUPT INEQUITY

Too often in the work of educational improvement, reformers have fallen into the trap of believing that efforts to help all students will automatically benefit the most vulnerable. We now know that this is not enough; a rising tide does not raise all boats equally. Instructional improvement agents must constantly and consciously focus on helping those marginalized by the deeply inequitable structures embedded in all educational systems.

If we, as improvers, can explicitly identify bias, deficit thinking, and racism in our approaches and shift to more holistic, strengths-based, and humane practices, we can, over time, disrupt the historical inequities that have plagued our public school system for far too long. Thinking routines for equity are one way to move in that direction.

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Coaches support literacy across subject areas

BY DOMINIQUE BRADLEY, MATTHEW WELCH, AND ALICIA GARCIA

Literacy is a fundamental skill for students in every academic subject area and, most importantly, for navigating the world outside of school. Research has shown that students who struggle with reading are at greater risk of failure across subject areas and of dropping out of school (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

This is why the Long Beach Network for School Improvement focuses on building educators' capacity to support student literacy skills in middle schools in Long Beach, California, with a particular focus on increasing the percentage of Black, Latinx, and low-income students who are on track for 8th-grade promotion and prepared to succeed in and after high school.

We support literacy development across subject areas at a time when students' learning experiences are
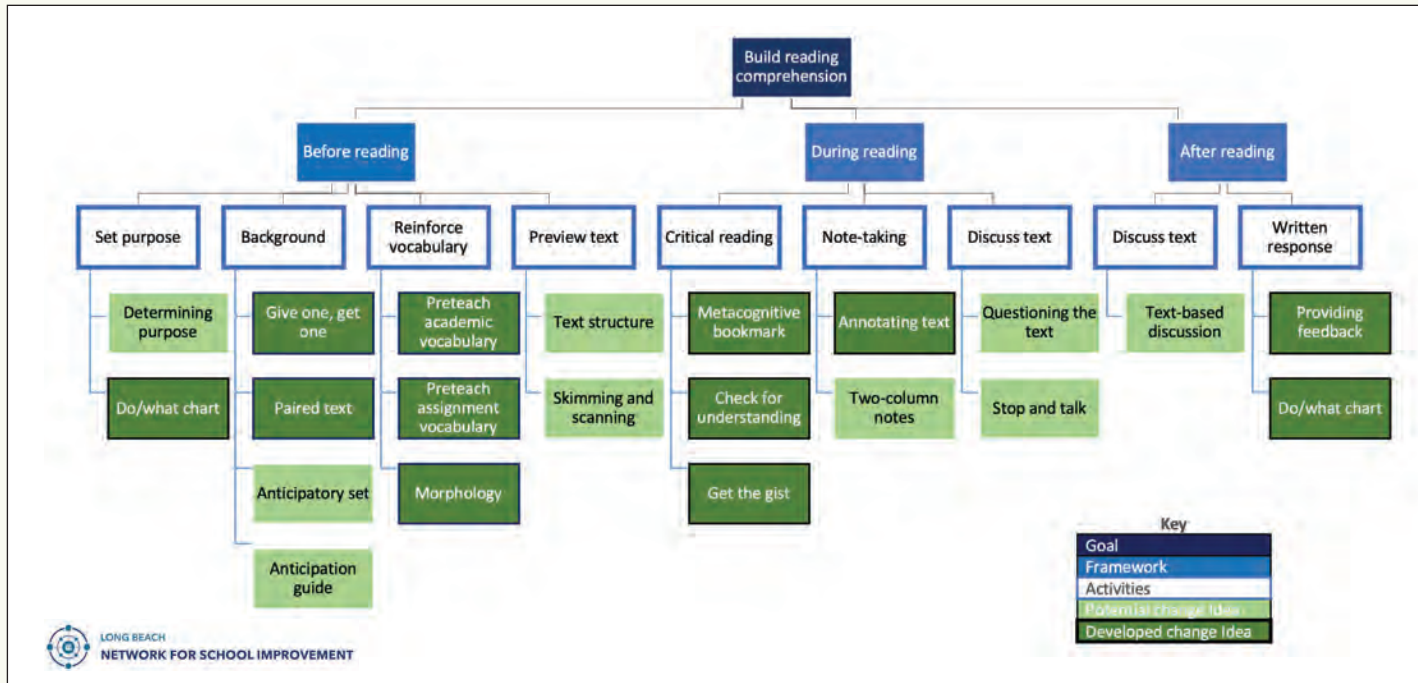
increasingly concentrated into subject-specific courses. Our change ideas are content agnostic, isolating literacy skills that students need to thrive not only in all classrooms, but also in their daily lives.

The figure above provides a map of the evidence-based change ideas our network uses and how they support literacy on a continuum of learning. It shows how we incorporate literacy strategies to support students before, during, and after reading. Examples of each include:

- Before reading: Ensure students understand lesson instructions and preteach vocabulary that will be used in a lesson;
- During reading: Engage with text through annotation and summarize the main points of a text; and
- After reading: Provide feedback to deepen student understanding of the text.

In this article, we introduce how our network operates, provide early findings of student success, share strategies that we found support cross-content implementation, and outline

the challenges our network has faced and new ideas we are testing to address these challenges.

COACHING SUPPORT

The network launched in fall 2020, just after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The network includes 97 middle school English language arts and social studies teachers and administrators from 10 schools in Long Beach Unified School District. A network hub, of which we (the authors of this article) are a part, supports these schools with professional learning, convening, and logistical support.
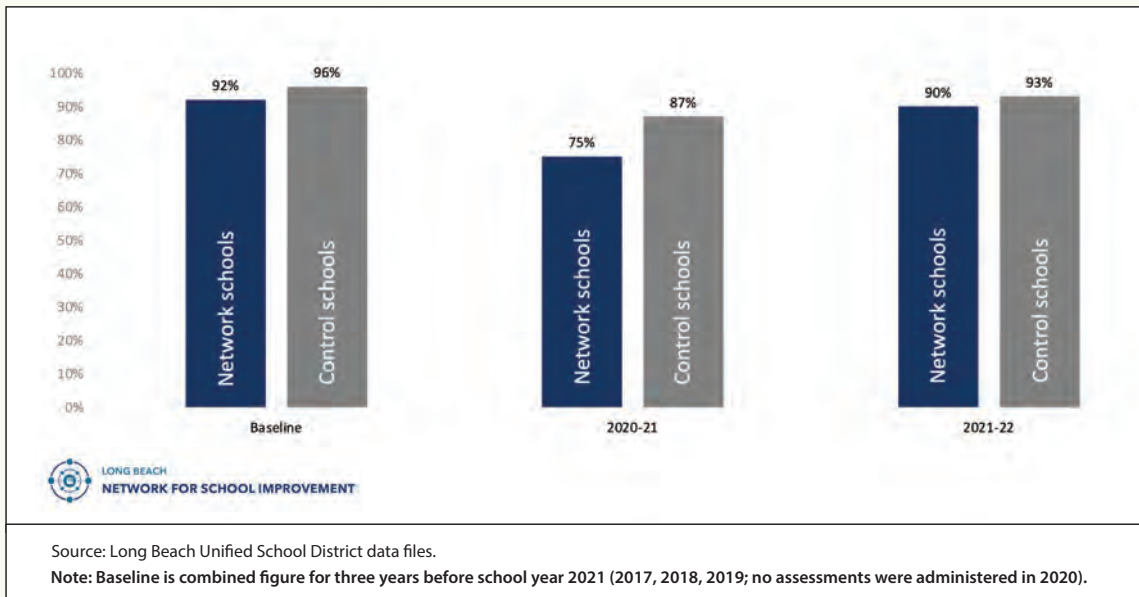
The network hub includes coaches who work with teachers in their schools. Those coaches are supported by subject matter experts in literacy and diversity, equity and inclusion, coaching, and research. The subject matter experts in literacy work with the coaches to identify literacy strategies that can support literacy across content areas in English language arts and history and that meet students' needs within individual classrooms and What Works Clearinghouse standards for evidence-

based practice. By using this approach, our network leverages expertise in the field and strategies that have been proven to work with similar students to improve literacy skills.

Network coaches support teachers to implement change ideas with a focus on the key teacher moves that affect student learning. At the same time, they support teachers to engage student voice, meet the needs of diverse learners, and respond to their particular classroom context and student composition. By identifying common gaps in students' literacy skills, teacher teams in both English language arts and social studies can then move to identify a common change idea that will benefit students across classrooms, such as annotating for understanding, identifying the main idea, or using academic vocabulary.

Once school teams come to a commonly agreed-upon change idea, we use several coaching strategies to support cross-content work. Our hub team literacy experts help take the burden off teacher teams and network coaches by identifying core components

STUDENTS PASSING ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS, GRADE 8

Source: Long Beach Unified School District data files.

Note: Baseline is combined figure for three years before school year 2021 (2017, 2018, 2019; no assessments were administered in 2020).

of a strategy that must be present in implementation for a change idea to be carried out with enough fidelity for teacher efforts to be effective.

Coaches work with teacher teams to develop an implementation plan that specifies how all teachers will introduce the change idea in their classrooms, model it for students, and gradually release responsibility for that strategy to students over time. This coaching and planning process allows enough flexibility for individual teachers to adjust implementation for their specific classroom context.

CROSS-CONTENT COMPARISON

Teachers identify measures of short-term proficiency and student engagement that the entire school team will use to assess whether their change idea and specific teacher moves are working to increase students' comprehension and engagement. This identification of common measures helps cross-content area teams see how they can talk across the subject areas. Coaching conversations are

key to helping the English language arts and history teachers come to this common understanding and common measurement strategy.

One example of this process is the development of a three-point rubric teachers use to assess several samples of student work from each teacher's classroom. The common rubric allows for teams to measure students' application of a strategy regardless of content area or type of assignment. In this way, teacher teams can talk about how well the strategy supported student learning broadly and whether that learning took place in social studies or English language arts assignments. They then work with their network coaches to determine what they will continue to do or what they will change.

EARLY FINDINGS

As we work with coaches and schools, the network hub members constantly ask: How do we know this process is working? Results on the short-term measures the school teams

selected and used tell us that some strategies are working and that some are working better than others. But as a network, we want to know our efforts are producing overall, long-term success, so we also examine student achievement data.

In the figure above, we look at the percentage of 8th-graders passing English language arts (that is, receiving a grade higher than an F), comparing cohorts of students attending network schools and other schools at several time points: just before the pandemic, after the launch of the network and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (school year 2020-21), and the following year (2021-22).

It is not surprising that many schools, including network schools, saw a drop in student academic outcomes after the onset of the pandemic, as represented in the middle bars of the figure. In the following year, however, English language arts passing rates improved, and network schools appeared to be rebounding from learning loss at slightly faster rates than

comparison schools: Network schools' English language arts passing rates were at only 2.4 percentage points below their prepandemic baseline, whereas comparison schools were 3.1 percentage points below their baseline.

Furthermore, Black and Latinx students in network schools are showing greater rebounds in literacy learning than students in other non-network schools in the district. While these initial results cannot be interpreted as causal, they do show promising trends related to the efforts of teachers in the network.

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES

Given these promising results, we feel encouraged by our use of content-agnostic change ideas to reach our aim of improved literacy skills. However, these successes have not come without challenges.

Schools everywhere have experienced the challenges that came with the onset of COVID — remote learning, staff and student illness, intermittent lockdowns, general frustration with the new normal — and network schools are not immune to those stresses. Collecting data, developing implementation plans, and attending meetings to prepare to implement or modify a change idea can feel like an additional burden on already maxed-out teachers. Our network coaches and hub continue to puzzle over how to shift our approach so that implementing and testing change ideas is less of a burden and nests more seamlessly into the classroom.

We removed some of the cognitive load of implementing change ideas by developing visual maps of our change ideas. For example, teachers can see the trajectory of learning to read for understanding and how the change ideas fit together in a constellation of strategies to support student learning. We have also developed slide decks and one-pagers (see the figure above) that simplify and visualize the core components of change ideas.

EXAMPLE OF A VISUAL SUMMARY OF A CHANGE IDEA FOR TEACHERS' QUICK REFERENCE

We also moved the burden of documenting data from teachers to the coaches, using preformatted spreadsheets, Google Jamboards, and note-catchers that can be completed during coaching meetings so that teachers don't have to take additional actions outside of meetings. We are flexible in scheduling those coaching and network meetings, which sometimes means moving at a slower than ideal pace, but the trade-off is worth it to keep implementation going.

Many of these changes are new this school year, so we don't know yet which changes or coaching strategies help teachers stay focused on doing the work of teaching while growing their own practice and deepening their pedagogy. While we continue to learn, it is our hope that the lessons from our network can provide valuable insights for other networks, professional learning leaders, and teachers as they navigate their own goals and challenges.

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Teacher leaders help change ideas stick

BY SARA DeMARTINO, GLENN NOLLY, AND ANTHONY PETROSKY

Learning to use improvement science — a structured process for planning, implementing, and studying change efforts — takes time. That time is a worthwhile investment for schools aiming to shift teaching and learning, but it can be a barrier in schools that are often beset by leadership turnover. How can schools, and external partners like us, address that challenge and help improvement science efforts achieve their potential?

In our work supporting improvement in secondary school literacy practices, we at the Institute for Learning have discovered the power of teacher leadership to institutionalize knowledge, spread innovation, and maintain the momentum of improvement science efforts. When veteran teachers offer coaching, feedback, and follow-up to other teachers in their schools, they can help

improvement practices stick (Hill & Papay, 2022). They also stretch and develop new skills that support their own professional growth.

Cultivating teacher leaders has become a key strategy for our work with a network of schools in Dallas, Texas. These leaders are helping put promising, sustainable change ideas into practice. Since those changes have gone into place, every school in the network has seen improved achievement.

ABOUT THE NETWORK

In 2018, the Institute for Learning partnered with 14 middle and high schools in Dallas Independent School District to improve 9th-grade literacy, starting in 8th- and 9th-grade English language arts classrooms. The schools serve largely Hispanic and Black students, many from low-income families, and have a larger number of students with special needs than other schools in the district. Each school received a grade of C or D from the Texas Education Agency, based on factors including students' scores on the state test and academic growth from

previous years. As with other schools that have similar characteristics (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017), these 14 schools have a large number of early career teachers and high rates of turnover.

As a hub for the network, the Institute for Learning builds the schools' knowledge and capacity both on improvement science and the instructional ideas to test. We start by engaging teacher leads from each school to understand the problem of practice and its root causes. We then engage leads in learning about instructional ideas that could positively impact the problem. The leads take the set of change ideas — which we call change packages — back to their schools and work with their teaching teams to adapt and test those changes.

At monthly network meetings, improvement leads initially experience the change ideas as learners, similar to how students would be asked to engage with instruction, to help them internalize the work. After they reflect on and discuss this experience, we ask the leads to share the strategies at their schools as a bridge to practice.

They engage their colleagues in the change ideas, help them reflect on what the instruction did for their own learning, and support them to implement similar instructional strategies in their classrooms. This shared engagement and reflection compels teachers to work together as they plan tests of change and builds a sense of shared ownership over making sure that instructional adaptations are effective for every student (McConachie & Petrosky, 2009).

During subsequent network meetings, the improvement leads share the experience of leading their peers in the work and learn from one another. Throughout this process, the improvement leads develop their mentorship skills. The importance of mentors to classroom teachers has been noted frequently in the literature on teacher development, particularly with early career educators (Odell & Ferraro, 1992; Wang & Odell, 2002), and we have seen that they are also important for implementing improvement science. They play key roles in making sure that critical features of an improvement

culture and knowledge of instruction remain in schools when new teachers are brought into the process.

WHAT MENTORING LOOKS LIKE

Brad Dominy has been a teacher at Adamson High School for 23 years. Adamson is a large urban high school south of downtown Dallas. The school serves 1,500 students in grades 9-12. Most students at Adamson are Hispanic (94.8%), with 3.5% of students identifying as Black and 1% identifying as white. Ninety-seven percent of students are economically disadvantaged.

In 2018, when we began our improvement work, Adamson had earned a C rating, with 34% of students scoring proficient or above in English language arts on the state test (TEA, 2019). Just a few years after joining the network, Adamson's performance improved to a B rating.

We met Dominy in 2018 at the first meeting for our network. He was teaching 11th-grade English language arts and co-leading the school's English department. Dominy began his work as an instructional lead with our network because teaching and learning at Adamson had become stagnant. "We were maintaining, but we weren't changing much," he said. He believed that improvement science offered a way to understand what was causing the stagnation in student growth and develop and implement a plan that would lead to academic growth over time.

Dominy and his department co-lead worked with us during the first year of the network on a monthly basis, learning about improvement science, collecting artifacts related to our problem of practice, analyzing those artifacts, and working with his team to develop a diagram of the intended change process. He then worked with us to build his knowledge of high-leverage instructional practices, such as student-centered routines to support cognitively demanding tasks for complex texts, that he could bring back to the 9th-grade teachers at Adamson. He

began implementing these change ideas with his team while also participating in network meetings and developing his own knowledge and skills.

In December 2021, three years after we began working with Dominy, we observed his coaching with three new 9th-grade English language arts team members, all new to the improvement work. Two were in the first few years of teaching.

Dominy asked our team to attend the meeting to help the Adamson team collaborate on planning a new instructional idea. In the first year of the network, teachers had noted that the curriculum did not provide students opportunities to engage with and make meaning of complex texts, and they posited that this could be a significant cause of the lack of academic growth. To shift instruction toward more cognitively demanding work, teachers collaborated to select relevant and engaging texts, develop open-ended text-based questions that get at big ideas, and sequence student-centered routines, such as quick writes, pair-shares, and charting, then invite students to use talk and writing to deepen their understanding of texts.

The Adamson team had selected the poem "Curanderismo" (Brown, 2020) for its complex ideas and relevance to the school's largely Mexican student population. Dominy facilitated the planning by first asking the teachers to do the work they would in turn ask students to do, starting with composing a quick write to respond to the question, "What's Brown saying in this poem?"

Over the next two hours, we explained, interpreted, and argued about the ideas in the poem and the content that was worth asking students to dig into. Dominy led the discussions and took notes. He asked the team to first understand the poem and what it offered, then to backwards plan: What was the final product that they wanted students to produce at the culmination of their work with the poem?

He then asked the teachers to think through the student-centered

instructional tasks that needed to happen to deepen students' understanding of Brown's poem and support them to be successful with the culminating task. Rather than telling teachers what to do, Dominy facilitated the discussion using questions to get teachers thinking through the planning process — a process that he had experienced and reflected on at a network meeting.

By the end of the meeting, the Adamson team had created the framework for an instructional arc of tasks that would help students respond to an intellectually challenging prompt:

Arianna Brown, who wrote the poem "Curanderismo," says that she is the "girl who washes herself with poems & finally gets to the therapist." Sometimes people need to heal, mentally or emotionally, after difficult situations or life experiences. Think carefully about this statement. Write an essay explaining how people heal from mental or emotional pain.

Over the next several weeks, teachers implemented the work on "Curanderismo." Dominy collected reflections and worked with teachers to make adaptations as needed. He also committed to visiting each classroom to help teachers track the impact the work had on students and provide some instructional coaching.

In reflecting on Dominy's role as an improvement lead and mentor, one teacher said, "We're learning the whole time we're planning. [Dominy] pushes us to ask why, what's the purpose of the work?" He said that it was satisfying to engage in the instructional design process, and added, "It's a lot of work, but it's worth it when you have the results in the classroom."

The teachers at Adamson trust Dominy and the process because of the knowledge and commitment that he brings to Adamson's collaborative planning meetings and the growth that teachers have seen in students' learning as a result. He understands the students at Adamson and the conditions that created literacy deficits as well as the processes he has learned from participating in the network.

SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

As the hub for our improvement network, we can help leads feel confident in their ability to build improvement capacity in other teachers at their schools. However, unless school leaders have created a system that supports the improvement leads to act as mentors, especially when the leads are not in an official position of power, they may not feel that they have the space to work with other teachers at the schools.

Dominy's ability to mentor the teachers at his school didn't happen by chance. School leaders created the conditions that empowered him to lead improvement work at the school. Adamson's principal was thoughtful about who she invited into the initial conversations on improvement.

She selected Dominy because of his experience as a teacher and his investment in improving teaching and learning at the school. The principal also removed barriers in attending the monthly network meetings, which took place after school, by not scheduling other school meetings or professional learning at the same time.

Over time, the principal has made sure that representation at monthly network convenings is stable. Dominy has remained the improvement lead for five years. Though he does not teach the grade targeted in our improvement work, he's been empowered to lead the 9th-grade teachers in inquiring into their practice.

To support him, the principal has found discretionary funds to pay 9th-grade teachers to attend professional learning community meetings after school that are dedicated to improvement work. School leaders frequently attend these meetings to develop their own understanding of the work that the 9th-grade team is undertaking and support the improvement efforts.

IDENTIFYING MENTORS

Dominy is not an anomaly in our

> **Brad Dominy's ability to mentor the teachers at his school didn't happen by chance. School leaders created the conditions that empowered him to lead improvement work at the school. Adamson's principal was thoughtful about who she invited into the initial conversations on improvement.**

network. Half of our network schools have one teacher who has become an effective mentor for new teachers at their school and in our network. We recommend that other networks employ a similar model of cultivating teacher leaders.

These mentor teachers — who typically opt into the work — tend to share a few characteristics that can be helpful when trying to identify teachers that could serve as mentors in the future. They demonstrate understanding of their school context, including who students are as people and as learners. They have deep content knowledge, which allows them to help new teachers blend improvement science and content-based instruction. They demonstrate a desire to improve teaching and learning at the school and the ability and willingness to take an inquiry stance and learn with and from other teachers.

If you have a teacher who demonstrates these characteristics, the next step is to empower that teacher to learn about improvement science, then work alongside that teacher to understand the identified problem in context, and finally to minimize the obstacles that might prevent that teacher from working with peers to improve the problem facing your school.

This process of cultivating leaders for change requires work, but with time and investment comes instructional

expertise and an improved learning experience for students. For the first time since 2019, Texas released school grades for our network schools. Each school showed improvement over 2019. With support for improvement, we believe such changes can become the norm for many schools.

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IDEAS

PUTTING DATA TO WORK

Data is a powerful force for change, but only if it's timely and actionable. Authors in this section examine how to put data in the hands of those who can learn from it and apply it to improve.

Members of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Networks for School Improvement community of practice create visual representations of their learning during a June 2022 convening in Baltimore, Maryland.

PRACTICAL MEASURES
make data timely and useful

BY ANDREW BRANNEGAN AND SOLA TAKAHASHI

Educators have long been awash in a sea of standardized test score data, with the understanding that their engagement with these data will lead to improvement in teaching and learning. But, in practice, these data have often been too infrequent, too lagging, and too distant from day-to-day practice to inform actionable next steps.

To improve practice, the data that educators can really benefit from are practical measures — those they can use to try out new strategies, get quick feedback, reflect and learn, make modifications, and start the cycle again.

Practical measurement is a process through which educators capture and analyze targeted data in a light-touch way so they can reflect on their practices and consider next steps and actions. Practical measures can provide
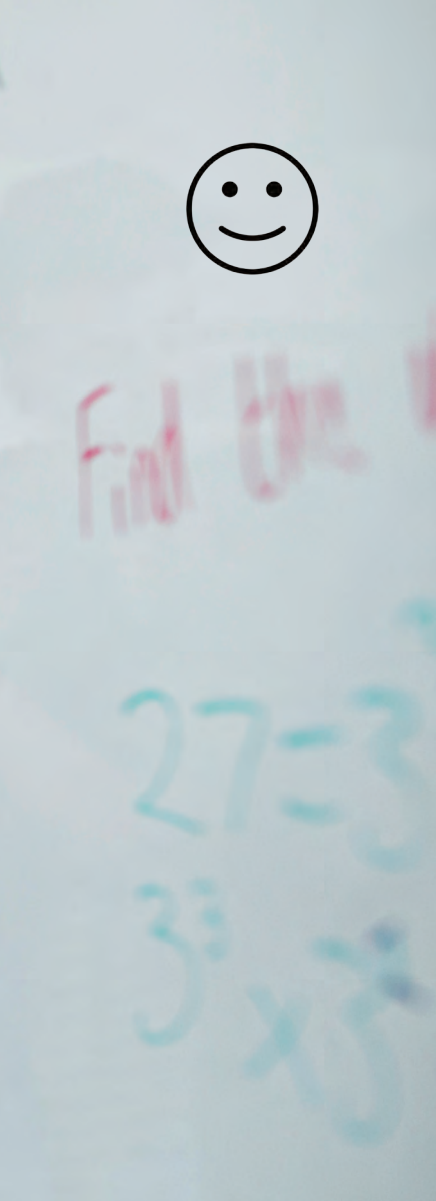
valuable and timely information to identify systemic breakdowns, focus educators' attention on aspects of practice that matter, propel improvement efforts from one stage to the next, and build confidence in changes that have been tried and are showing promise. They provide opportunities for educators to learn what works, what doesn't work, and how to get certain ideas to work.

What makes a measure practical? Such measures are:

- Closely connected to specific aspects of practice, rather than being focused on broad outcomes;
- Easy for an educator to administer without extensive training, time, or resources; and

- Collected regularly with a quick turnaround time.

Educators in the Networks for School Improvement, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to increase positive educational outcomes for Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty, have used practical measures to better understand and adapt their practices. On the following pages is a story of how one network uses practical measures to inform its continuous improvement efforts and see results.

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WESTED SUPPORTS NETWORKS

Since 2020, WestEd has been working with math-focused Networks for School Improvement to support them in their use of measures to inform continuous improvement. WestEd has developed a repository of math practical measures and is collaborating with networks to develop practical measures of math teachers' professional learning and classroom equity. This project has also entailed facilitating professional learning and peer learning for network leaders on the use of measurement for improvement.

To learn more about practical measurement and see a repository of practical measures focused on middle grades math, visit **mpm.wested.org.**

A SIMPLE SURVEY IMPROVES A MATH INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY

SETTING & STUDENTS

Energy Tech High School, in Queens, New York, a participant in the Instructional Network for School Improvement with New Visions for Public Schools.

9th-grade students in Erin Cramm's, Jack Kui's, and Bushra Mistry's classrooms.

GOAL

Improve the quantity and quality of students' mathematical discourse in Algebra 1.

STRATEGY

The Algebra 1 teaching team used the Info Gap routine from Illustrative Mathematics in their classrooms. In this activity, one student had a problem card and another student had a data card. Each had some information but not enough to solve the problem on their own. The problem card student asked the data card student questions to get information that could help them solve the problem. The goal was to help both students develop skills in communicating about math concepts as well as meta-cognitive and collaboration skills.

MEASURE

The team developed a three-question student survey to understand student experiences with the Info Gap routine, which they administered to students after the activity. They asked:

- Did using the Info Gap routine help you understand the math vocabulary better?
- Did you feel confident or comfortable talking about math with your partner? Explain why.
- Is there anything you would change about the routine? Why or why not?

For each item, students choose one of three emoji-based ratings. They were also given space to describe why they chose that rating.

☺ ■ Positive

😐 ■ Neutral

☹ ■ Negative

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Did using the Info Gap routine help you understand the math vocabulary better?	16	20	6
Did you feel confident or comfortable talking about math with your partner? Explain why.	28	6	7
Is there anything you would change about the routine? Why or why not?	16	14	11
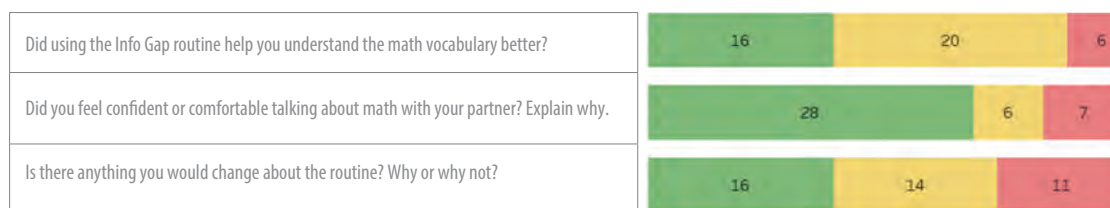
■ Positive ■ Neutral ■ Negative

RESULTS

After the first time conducting the activity and the survey, the team found:

- The majority of students felt neutral or negative about the protocol helping them understand vocabulary better.
- Most students responded positively about feeling confident or comfortable talking about math with their partner.
- When asked if there was anything they would change about the protocol, there was an even distribution of responses. Upon further review of the qualitative data, the teachers realized that most students felt positively about the protocol but were confused by the wording of the survey question and the emoji response options.

CHANGE IDEAS AND NEXT STEPS

The teaching team conducted the Info Gap activity again. This time, to address the challenge students reported with understanding the math vocabulary, the teachers added question stems for students to use in shaping their questions. For example, the problem card student was prompted to start questions with, "Can you tell me _____?" and "I need to know _____ because _____." The data card student would be prompted with the stems, "What specific information do you need about _____?" and "Why do you need to know _____?"

The team plans to readminister the survey and analyze the data to determine if the changes to the activity made a difference in students' understanding. They also plan to edit the third question of the survey and encourage students to provide more information in the open response so that they will gain more insight into students' experiences.

When we LISTEN to students, we IMPROVE our schools

BY UCHENNA LEWIS, AMANDA FAULKNER, AND JESSE ROE

Young people come to us with many challenges, but speaking their minds isn't usually one of them. Our students tell us what they think pretty much all the time. Every utterance and every cue from their body language is a data point that communicates important information. But it can be hard for educators to prioritize student feedback while managing myriad sources of information from in and outside of the classroom.

The biggest challenge to incorporating student voice has almost nothing to do with students' actual voices. Those are loud and clear. The challenge has to do with our eyes and ears. We need to learn and practice centering students' perspectives in our

school improvement efforts.

Equipping educators to hear students' voices, and then translate that information into concrete behavioral and instructional changes, is what our team at Partners in School Innovation has undertaken in San Jose, California, for the last several years. Our efforts have not only suggested promising practices, but also highlighted important lessons for other educators and organizations trying to build educators' capacity to incorporate student voice into school improvement strategies and instructional feedback loops. They have reminded us that students are a vital yet often overlooked source of professional learning for educators at all levels. For them to learn from us, we have to learn from them.

OPENING OUR EARS TO STUDENT FEEDBACK

In fall 2020, just after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we began working with nine schools across four districts in San Jose, California. Educators in those schools formed a network for school improvement, and our team operated as coaches and support professionals, working shoulder-to-shoulder with educators and providing real-time feedback on

their daily practice while supporting the broader development of a systemwide approach to school transformation.

By 2021, the reality in San Jose reflected the broader confusion of the American public policy response to COVID-19: waves of illness and death; day-to-day uncertainty about school opening and closing; and glitchy implementation of hybrid instruction. Adding to the complexity of those broader challenges, East San Jose has the highest concentration of low-income families in the city, and about one-third of the children in these schools are classified as English learners.

It was clear to everyone that students, who were still engaged in hybrid learning, were struggling, especially in math and especially when they returned to instruction after being ill. But it was hard to figure out exactly what was going on with the students and what kind of support they needed, in part because many students resisted turning their cameras on during virtual learning. We decided to go directly to the source.

We asked students to come to one of our network sessions and share with school and network leaders their perspectives through student experience panels. To make the feedback sessions

more comfortable for students and educators, we set up the panels so that students only spoke to teachers at schools they did not attend.

The first round of panels was eye-opening, and it marked an important turning point in adults' willingness to really hear student voices. Young people shared their anxiety about returning to school amidst an ongoing pandemic, and what they said reflected a broader sense of feeling alienated by the complexity of math instruction. Without the distractions inherent in classrooms, teachers were completely focused on students' perspectives. And they heard what they had not been able to hear before.

After the panels, teachers talked about how much they had missed by not making time to listen and process more regularly, and they demonstrated an interest in doing so more in the future. To reach that goal, our team supported the network in prioritizing student voice on a more systematic basis. We also engaged educators in learning about how to incorporate students' feedback in meaningful ways.

LEVERAGING QUALITATIVE DATA

We knew that the collection and analysis of qualitative data would

SAMPLE EMPATHY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Tell me about a time in middle school when you felt successful in math.
Tell me about a time in middle school when you struggled in math.
What grade or subject are you most excited about?
What are your hopes and goals for the future? What are some options you are interested in? What careers do you want to explore?

be central to our work, so we used the book *Street Data* as an anchor text for our leaders (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Schools often have routines for collecting and analyzing quantitative data, like test scores and attendance, but *Street Data* offers tools for gathering information about topics that feel more esoteric or harder to measure, like student voice. District and site leaders read the book in professional learning communities, then used their discussions as a starting point for strategic implementation.

From that work, two major approaches emerged for incorporating student voice more systemically: empathy interviews and a survey about math mindsets.

Empathy interviews

Empathy interviews have been around for a half-century, used by social and product engineers to unearth foundational, yet hidden, truths about user experiences, as a means to improve the design of products, processes, systems, and structures.

Conducting empathy interviews is simple: You create an interview protocol that includes targeted, open-ended questions about the problem you're trying to address, then sit with stakeholders — in this case, students — one-on-one to ask the questions. The deepest realizations emerge from in-depth follow-up questions, so it's critical to allow the conversation to travel where the student leads, rather

than be limited to the questions on the protocol. See the box above for some sample empathy interview questions.

We used empathy interviews in San Jose middle schools to understand a variety of challenges, including underwhelming math performance and students' struggles with school re-entry after COVID-19 infections. We wanted to ensure that these processes were easy for adults to conduct and learn from but also led to real instructional and behavioral changes. To that end, we created standardized interview protocols that could be useful for multiple situations and built simple data visualization mechanisms using Google Jamboards. We also engaged in professional learning with teachers to prepare them to be interviewers.

At August Boeger Middle School, students told us they craved more collaborative problem-solving time in math and that they always seemed to understand lessons better when teachers provided multiple methods for solving problems. Although we had worked with teachers in the past to encourage best practices on teaching multiple methods (Rittle-Johnson et al., 2017), teachers didn't incorporate that approach consistently until they heard the feedback from students.

Educators at LeyVa Middle School learned valuable lessons about school re-entry after COVID-19 infection. Students said they wanted to hear more focus on their well-being in return-to-school messaging, whereas

much of those communications focused on making up for missed work, which further alienated students who were already reeling from their own or family members' illness.

Teachers took the feedback to heart and made a concerted effort to be more sympathetic and encouraging toward students as they tried to get back on track after being absent. They also waived some noncritical, nonsummative assignments for students so their academic load would be more manageable. Finally, school leaders set aside resources to pay teachers to provide tutoring after school for students who had missed school due to COVID-19.

Although it is difficult to prove that these conversations and changes in educators' strategies led to changes in academic performance, there is at least some evidence of positive correlation. Across grades at Boeger Middle, for example, students scoring a C or above in math class increased their average trimester grades by 12 percentage points in the trimester after we implemented the interviews, which is a leading indicator of being on track for 8th-grade graduation.

One Boeger teacher described the process of receiving student feedback as both eye-opening and a critical antecedent to professional learning. "I was surprised to see that the students already knew their challenges," she said. "For example, one of my students shared that he has trouble seeing the whiteboard." The teacher subsequently

My peers value my ideas in math class.
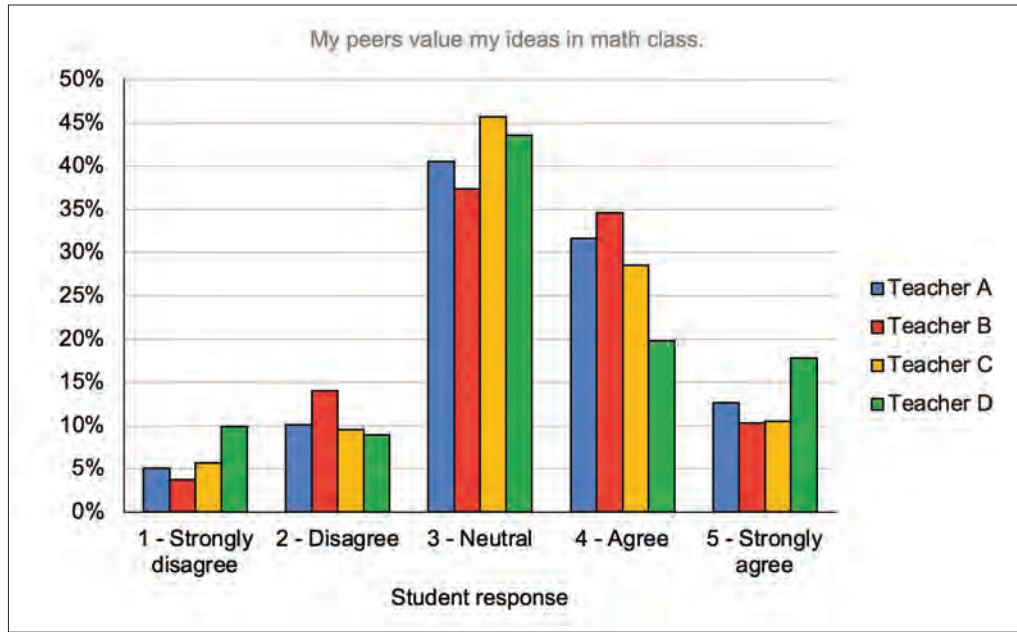
began using different whiteboard markers, a simple shift that enhanced the quality of her instruction while demonstrating that she was listening and cared.

Math mindsets survey

While empathy interviews are great for going deep with a small number of students, surveys can be more effective for collecting broad data across a larger group of individuals. That's what the educators at Davis Intermediate School did when we worked with them to create and administer a math mindsets survey, which we adapted from a tool created by High Tech High Graduate School of Education and WestEd (Challen et al., 2021).

Surveys asked questions such as, "Do you feel successful in math class?" and "Do you feel like you can ask questions and express your ideas in class?" The questions were rooted in the idea that math, like any learning, is anchored in identity. If students don't think of themselves as "math people," namely being capable of doing math at a high level, their engagement, excitement, participation, and performance will reflect that lack of identification.

We administered the survey, then used what we learned from our professional learning on qualitative data to create basic visualizations that highlighted how students were feeling about math instruction (see the chart above). Teachers looked at the survey data disaggregated by classroom, then created goals for improving student mindsets about math. For example, some teachers decided they wanted to increase the percentage of students responding positively to the prompt, "My peers value my ideas in math class."

The survey helped isolate areas for instructional improvement. Teachers internalized the data from the survey, changed practices, then measured student perceptions again later in the year. For example, Davis math teachers began holding one-on-one conferences with students to provide individualized support for their aspirations as mathematicians.

HOW TO USE STUDENT FEEDBACK

While working with the San Jose middle schools, we learned some important lessons, both about strategies to use for collecting student voice data

and how to translate student feedback into professional learning and changes in educator practice.

Take action. Schools can get caught in a sort of "analysis paralysis" when it comes to collecting qualitative data on student voice, so it's important to take action quickly. It's counterproductive to overthink your approach here, as there is no such thing as the perfect strategy.

Just pick something and try it. When we wanted to administer a survey about math attitudes, for example, we didn't hire a psychometrician to create a statistically valid instrument; we just found an existing instrument and adapted it using some questions whose answers we were curious about.

A corollary consequence of analysis paralysis is endless measurement, with no action. If you're soliciting student feedback on instructional practice, it's important for students to see their views reflected in classroom routines sooner rather than later. If students think they're sharing their views, but that you're not doing anything with that information, that's probably worse than never having asked them anything in the first place.

IDEAS

Depersonalize and anonymize student feedback. Students need to feel safe enough to express their true opinions, and teachers need to feel safe enough to hear them. When we anonymized the information, it depersonalized some of the tougher feedback and made it easier for people to hear.

With the student panel discussions, it obviously wasn't possible to anonymize the feedback, but we worked with students to prepare them and help them frame the broad themes and ideas they wanted to share. We supported them to share things that we knew had a better chance of leading to immediate shifts in school policies and educator practices.

Build habits and routines. When we first conducted empathy interviews, we thought it was something we could do once in a while, but then life got in the way and we didn't implement interviews with enough regularity. Without routines, we found ourselves starting from scratch the next time we went to collect data. We realized it would be more effective to build a regular cadence for conducting interviews.

For example, educators at LeyVa Middle School now conduct a round of student wellness surveys every time they administer quarterly formative assessments. They are ensuring that the frequency of qualitative data collection about students' perspectives matches that of their quantitative measures of achievement, and they are communicating to students that both sources of information are equally important to them.

Beyond frequency, another important habit involves reaching out to students who are the hardest to reach. If you only conduct interviews with student government representatives, for example, or those who speak up often in class, you're never going to get the full story.

Connect to a theory of action. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it's critical to link your exploration about student voice to your identified challenges and goals. In the case of the San Jose network, we had clear goals around both math instruction and improving school re-entry for students affected by COVID-19. We reoriented grade-level team meetings, observation protocols, and feedback practices to discuss instructional strategies to achieve those goals. We would have used different instruments, and explored different interview questions, if our goals had been different.

Improvement science requires following the data where it leads you, but you cannot solve a problem that you have not yet identified. While empathy interviews can unearth new challenges, you should be clear about whether you are searching for problems or looking for solutions to already identified challenges. Otherwise, your efforts may become too broad to be effective.

As with any school improvement strategy, the strength of implementation will depend on a broader set of systems for incorporating feedback into professional learning: structures for peer observation; routines for sharing feedback after observations; the presence of grade-level teaming in the school schedule; and dedicated time for reflection on new practices, to name a few.

If you are intentional about these strategies and supports, you're bound to learn some surprising things about your school and its scholars. For example, we learned that even the most disinterested-seeming students really cared about their math grades and that students are eager and able to shape instructional practices in ways that are supportive of their ultimate success.

Each piece of information we glean from students widens our aperture for improving schools. If we want to see the whole picture of what students need to succeed, it is essential that we are consistent and intentional about listening to them.

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Educators learned to use student data.

Graduation rates improved.

BY NIKKI GIUNTA

Across diverse sectors of the economy, standardized processes and shared tools have allowed professionals to manage complexity at enormous scale. Without that access to accurate information, the organizations we rely on would look very different.

Imagine a large retail business where executives have to call store managers to send employees up and down aisles with clipboards to answer basic questions about inventory. Imagine an investment bank where employees spend hours manipulating data in spreadsheets whenever they need to know the value of key assets. It's hard to envision these businesses operating so inefficiently.

Yet, too often, schools lack the kind of access to timely information and predictable processes that are taken for granted in other work settings, especially when we consider what happens in educators' direct work with students. Consider the experience of a student who begins the 7th grade reading at a 3rd-grade level. The instructional response to that student's

PRE-COVID-19 GRADUATION OUTCOMES							
	Class of 2014	Class of 2015	Class of 2016	Class of 2017	Class of 2018	Class of 2019	Change in graduation rate over five years
New Visions	77.3%	79.5%	81.9%	82.7%	83.9%	85.2%	7.9%
Renewal	52.8%	54.5%	60.2%	65.5%	72.1%	76.1%	23.3%
Citywide high school	79.2%	79.8%	81.7%	82.3%	83.5%	84.6%	5.4%

challenges is determined largely by the class and teacher to which the student happens to be assigned.

In many districts and schools, there is no defined protocol for supporting the student. Decisions about the curriculum, instructional tools, and types of reading assessments are often made by individual teachers or administrators. The processes for those decisions are not transparent, and professional learning to help educators carry them out is inconsistent. The result is that the student's likelihood of learning to read proficiently is left to chance.

This absence of common tools and standard processes happens in many aspects of education, including professional learning design, and it leads to large, unintended, and entirely preventable variations in student opportunity and outcomes.

The negative impact falls most heavily on those students with learning challenges, whose communities have been systematically marginalized, and who have the least external resources. This is not a failure of individual educators, but of a system to provide the infrastructure to build educators' capacity so they are responsive to all students in a large-scale, complex environment.

It is this type of problem that New Visions for Public Schools aims to solve as part of our longstanding goal to improve graduation rates across all of the 71 New York City schools in our network. Today, these schools have an average graduation rate of 91.5%, but at the time of our founding in 1989, the graduation rate in New York City had hovered for decades at around 50%.

Our work for two decades creating

effective small schools changed this trend and began a dramatic increase in high school outcomes. Despite this, by the end of the small school reform era, there were still too many students who were not graduating and many schools where the graduation rate was unacceptably low.

In 2014, we realized that students entering their senior year of high school with similar academic profiles across our network had dramatically different graduation outcomes. New York City has some of the most complex graduation requirements in the country, offering multiple diploma types and pathways, each of which includes many specific course requirements and subject-specific exit examinations.

This can lead to wide variation in graduation outcomes for students with similar profiles who attend

This screenshot shows the portal that allows educators to monitor student progress.

different schools. For example, when we compared students who began their senior year of high school with 30-plus credits and having passed two state subject exams, there was so much variation that one school graduated 100% of those students while another graduated only 19%, and other schools fell at many points in between.

Through many conversations with administrators and staff at our partner schools, we came to better understand key obstacles to graduation. We also came to realize that schools needed the key resources that those retail businesses and investment banks described above have — easy access to useful data — and opportunities to learn how to use it.

HARNESSING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

We recognized that to continue to consistently and dramatically improve graduation rates, we needed to enable educators to have easy access to integrated data in useful formats so that they could track who was graduating, who wasn't, and why. We also needed to develop and support student planning processes aligned to the data that educators could implement at scale so that no students would fall through the cracks.

We ultimately created a structure we call strategic data check-ins. The check-ins are protocol-driven conversations that take place at defined points during the school year in which educators use student-level data to learn about students' trajectories and make important decisions about how to support students so they'll be prepared to graduate. Strategic data check-ins provide schools with a framework for making decisions and sharing those decisions and action steps in a transparent way to avoid the all-too-common haphazard approach to student support.

We created strategic data check-ins for several aspects of student experience and achievement that affect the likelihood of graduation. The core check-ins and their associated strategies are:

- **Graduation planning:** Identify aspirational graduation date (e.g., June 2022) and diploma type (e.g., Regents);
- **Attendance:** Match all students with less than 90% attendance to an appropriate attendance support and monitor progress;
- **Credit gaps:** Identify courses students need to take to keep them on-track to actualize their graduation and postsecondary plan;
- **Marking period grade analysis:** Match all students who underperform in courses at midterm to academic support(s) and monitor their progress; and
- **Regents planning and prep:**

BLACK AND LATINX 80-PLUS GPA STUDENT OUTCOMES				
	Cohort 1 (18 schools)	Cohort 2 (16 schools)	Cohort 3 (9 schools)	Full network
2018-19	42%			42% (18 schools)
2019-20	47%	48.8%		47.3% (34 schools)
2020-21	46.5%	42.8%	53.8%	46.4% (43 schools)
2021-22	49.5%	49.7%	50.5%	49.5% (43 schools)

Plan and schedule the Regents exams (state exams in specific content areas) students need to achieve their graduation plans and college readiness. Once exams are planned, identify students needing additional support to achieve success on Regents exams, match them to an appropriate preparation activity, and monitor their progress.

THE NEW VISIONS DATA PORTAL

When we created the strategic data check-ins, we recognized that they alone would not change educators' practice and that a number of other components would have to work in concert with the data protocols.

For starters, the data required by the check-ins existed but were not quickly and readily available to administrators and counselors. If gathering the data from multiple sources and preparing it in a digestible way takes a researcher with strong spreadsheet skills three days of work, it's not going to be helpful to teachers in a meaningful, real-time way.

To understand and address this problem, we sat with educators and watched their struggles and workarounds to compensate for the absence of tools designed around their actual workflows. With a better understanding of their needs, we developed more sophisticated spreadsheet tools, which we piloted immediately at significant scale given our longstanding partnerships.

Over time, we were able to use the spreadsheet tools as a testing ground for what became a web application called the New Visions Data Portal. The portal automatically pulls reports from multiple New York City Public Schools data sources into a single place so that educators can easily identify students who are in need of attention.

It also provides space for schools to engage in and record student-level planning. Updated on a daily basis, the portal simplifies the gathering and analysis of data to allow school staff to focus their time and attention on planning and supporting students.

Initially, the portal was only available to schools in the New Visions network, but in response to demand, the New York City Public Schools expanded access to a growing group of schools, the Renewal Schools, a program initiated by the Department of Education to support a group of the most underperforming K-12 schools across the city. We engaged educators in professional learning about using the portal to conduct strategic data check-ins in a routinized manner. Eventually, the portal was rolled out to all K-12 public schools in the city.

Evidence over the last nine years (see table on p. 63) suggests that the citywide implementation of strategic

data check-ins using the portal supported progress on key academic indicators including attendance, credit accumulation, state exam performance, graduation rates, and college readiness rates. The improvement is most marked in the most underperforming schools, but improvement has occurred across the city.

The use of the portal and implementation of strategic data check-ins not only allowed our organization to hit and exceed our longstanding goal of an 80%-plus graduation rate, but also led to a significant reduction in graduation rate disparities across ethnicities.

COLLEGE READINESS NETWORK FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In summer 2018, we embarked on a new effort that would leverage our learning about the check-ins and the portal to dramatically increase the number of low-income students of color graduating from high school on time and prepared to succeed in college and career. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation selected New Visions to participate in Networks for School Improvement, a group of schools that would work together to use continuous improvement to solve common problems they face.

Through both national research and an analysis of data from our own network, we found that a GPA of 80-plus on a 100-point scale is the single most predictive indicator of college enrollment and persistence. We also learned that our students' GPAs at the end of 9th grade were highly predictive of GPAs at the end of high school. Among those who had lower than an 80 GPA in 9th grade, only 8% would go on to exceed the 80 threshold at the end of high school. This led us to narrow the aim of our network: to improve the percentage of Black and Latinx students achieving an 80-plus GPA by the end of 9th grade.

To support schools in monitoring yet another metric, we had to

integrate it into the routines that schools already had in place and provide them with the key data they needed to make decisions about academic support for students.

With that in mind, we leveraged what we learned from our initial set of check-ins and engaged in inquiry with educators to determine foundational strategies we could build on. We realized that we could expand on the marking period grade analysis check-in to include a review of students who weren't failing courses but were passing with a GPA lower than 80. These students are typically overlooked because they aren't struggling so much that they require a deep intervention, nor are they high achievers being primed for advanced coursework.

The image on p. 64 shows a screenshot of where we added new functionality to the portal so that educators can easily monitor progress toward an 80-plus GPA. (All names and data are fictional.) Here, schools can see not only the student's current GPA but what their projected GPA will be if their grades remain the same for the rest of the term.

Schools can see what the change in overall GPA would be if the projected GPA becomes actualized, the count of courses the student is not passing, courses they are passing but below the 80-plus threshold, and those where they already have an 80-plus — all of which help schools support students academically. Educators can use this information to either deploy existing student support strategies or engage in professional learning about how to support students in their challenge areas.

We knew that if we didn't build capacity and create routines at the school level, the new GPA metric could easily fall by the wayside. When we engage educators in learning how to use the system and then consistently support them to review data at key points in the year, over time it becomes part of the way the

team works.

Each time marking period data were released, our coaches helped educator teams at each school in the network use the portal to review GPA outcomes. As the years passed and teams became more experienced, we noticed that coaches needed to do less prompting and some of our teams included routines for reviewing gradebook data between formal marking periods. It stopped feeling like an add-on and became a common way that the teams worked.

IMPACT ON GPA OUTCOMES

The table on p. 65 shows the 80-plus GPA outcomes for our Black and Latinx students over the last four years. Although year-to-year changes have been inconsistent, which we believe is largely due to COVID-19 disruptions, the percentage of Black and Latinx students across our network achieving an 80-plus GPA has increased by 7.5% over four years. We attribute much of this to schools having routines for consistently reviewing this data and intervening when students were falling behind in courses.

APPROACH AND LESSONS

New Visions believes that, for institutions to be successful, they must have tight systems and reliable routines. Creating a tool and naming routines for using that tool are not sufficient. We needed to provide consistent support and repeatedly return to the same routines over multiple school years to build the capacity of team members.

The establishment of these routines not only provides stability to the school and ensures consistency in the quality of student plans, but also provides the space and time for schools to be more innovative, all of which have contributed to improved student outcomes over time.

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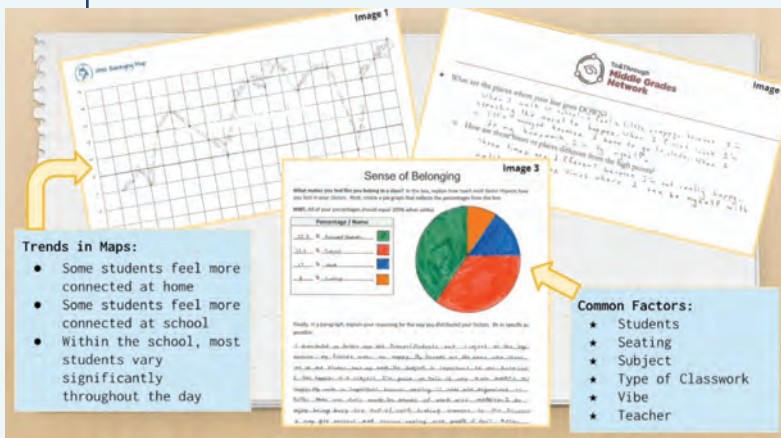**Nikki Giunta (ngiunta@ newvisions.org) is chief of staff at New Visions for Public Schools.** ■

TOOLS

Top: Students Finali Solivan (top right), Kanaan Smith (bottom left), and Naina Enock (bottom right) speak with Andres Perez (top left) from PERTS about their experiences providing feedback to teachers during an Elevate online showcase in October 2022.

Bottom: Examples of student feedback data and analysis.

LISTEN TO STUDENTS AND LEARN

Many educators aim to incorporate student perspectives into school improvement, but turning that vision into reality takes intentional processes and resources. The creators of the Elevate student voice platform share insights and reflection questions to help educators learn from and with students.

Student voice data accelerates teaching and learning

BY SARAH GRIPSHOVER, LILIA DIAZ DE LEWIS, ERIN ASHOKA, AND DAVE PAUNESKU

"I was pouring my heart and my soul into my class. However, instead of enjoying teaching, and instead of the students enjoying learning … I was dreading coming into work every day, and the students could feel it."

That's how middle school teacher Anna Stewart felt when she began using the Elevate student voice platform in fall 2021 as part of Impact Florida's

Solving with Students Cadre, a network of teachers focused on improving students' experiences in math. When her students took the Elevate survey, only 29% felt that lessons were relevant to their lives and only 46% felt cared for in her class. Stewart knew things had to change.

With support from colleagues in the Solving with Students Cadre, Stewart shared the data with her students and,

together, they brainstormed ideas to make class more engaging. As she implemented students' suggestions, Stewart recognized that her students were taking more ownership over their learning.

Stewart continued to administer the Elevate survey every few months to understand how the practice changes were affecting her students' classroom experiences. By the end of the year,

the survey results told an entirely new story: The share of her students who saw lessons as personally relevant skyrocketed from 29% to 83%, and the share who felt cared for grew by 40%. "We slowly became a family," says Stewart. "I was no longer stressed and exhausted at the end of the day when I got home."

Even though most schools collect student voice data, stories like Stewart's remain rare. The reason is simple: Teachers don't often get the right support to act on student feedback effectively. Fortunately, that's changing.

Stewart and many other educators and organizations are using a tool called Elevate to learn how student voice data can be used to drive transformation. Elevate is a continuous improvement platform designed to help educators measure, disaggregate, and track key classroom learning conditions.

Educators use Elevate surveys over multiple cycles of inquiry and action to fine-tune the learning environment for students, focusing on learning conditions that are strong predictors of student engagement and accelerated learning outcomes (Gripshover et al., 2022). For example, an educator might use Elevate's meaningful work measure to learn that only 40% of their students find assignments to be meaningful and then reassess meaningful work to test the impact of a new practice that was intended to make work more meaningful.

PERTS, the organization that designed Elevate, is continually learning with and from the educators and organizations who are using it to systematically improve learning conditions. Many of the Networks for School Improvement funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which are highlighted in this issue of *The Learning Professional*, are incorporating Elevate into their work, and from them we have learned much about the professional learning required to support teachers in this kind of work. You can read more about their work and what they are learning from Elevate on p. 70.

We have synthesized our learning into a brief series of reflection and planning exercises. We hope that the questions, planning prompts, and resources will prove helpful to school and district leaders who want to use student voice data for improvement.

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Network for College Success/Chicago Public Schools

As the third-largest school district in the nation, Chicago Public Schools serves over 350,000 students, 76% of whom quality for free and reduced-price lunch. The Network for College Success and the district began using Elevate in fall 2020 to understand young people's learning experiences during a challenging school year.

Based on their initial survey results, teachers sought additional insight from students about questions such as: "What kinds of schoolwork do students find meaningful and what kind of feedback inspires their intellectual growth?" Through these conversations, they realized that many young people had never even been asked to consider what makes schoolwork feel meaningful to them, let alone had teachers work with them to create more meaningful learning experiences. This insight has galvanized teachers to attend more carefully to students' learning experiences.

West Buffalo Charter School

West Buffalo Charter School in Buffalo, New York, serves about 460 K-8 students, 89% of whom qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. The school has eight 6th- through 8th-grade teachers. West Buffalo teachers tracked learning conditions five times over the course of the 2021-22 school year. In some classes, students' experiences were overwhelmingly positive, whereas in other classes, their experiences were more mixed.

To understand these differences, teachers engaged in sometimes challenging conversations with each other and their students. Over time, many teachers saw their survey data tick upward, with students having more positive experiences. This boosted morale and built momentum so that at the end of the year, teachers had improved students' experiences significantly schoolwide, with 75% to 83% of students experiencing each of six positive learning conditions by the end of the year.

Bank Street/Yonkers Public Schools

Yonkers Public Schools is a large district in southeastern New York serving over 25,000 students, 79% of whom qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Teachers and staff worked with the Bank Street Education Center using Elevate as part of a broader effort to address disparities in mathematics education.

They considered Elevate data alongside other data sources, including test scores, attendance records, disciplinary data, and empathy interviews. The Elevate data pointed to an opportunity to translate their already strong social and emotional learning practices into deeper mathematics learning for students.

The network aligned on Feedback for Growth (**perts.net/elevate/feedback-for-growth**) as an actionable lever for creating more equitable learning in mathematics and set a collective aim to increase the percentage of students experiencing strong feedback for growth districtwide.

Six schools then made significant progress toward this aim between January and May 2022, improving by as much as seven to 14 percentage points. Interestingly, most schools made gains on all six learning conditions, not just Feedback for Growth. They are working in 2022-23 to deepen these gains.

HOW TO LEARN AND IMPROVE WITH STUDENT FEEDBACK

The following reflection questions and related resources are designed to help you make the most of student voice data and overcome common challenges in the process of obtaining, analyzing, and acting on it. Consider the reflection questions individually or as part of a team, and consult the resources that resonate with your current challenges and wonderings. The resources listed here are free Elevate resources that can be found on the PERTS website at **perts.net/lp-tools**. However, none of these insights or principles are unique to Elevate, and we believe these considerations are relevant to any effort to improve student voice and experience, regardless of what framework or tool you use.

QUESTIONS TO BUILD A CULTURE OF REFLECTION

Receiving critical feedback from students is sensitive work for most teachers. A trusting, growth-oriented professional learning community can give teachers the support they need to respond productively — rather than defensively — in the face of challenging feedback. Consider the following questions as you develop a plan for building a professional learning culture that supports teachers' growth.

How will we build trust and create space for vulnerability and reflection in the professional learning communities where student voice data will be reviewed?	RESOURCES AVAILABLE: • Sample letter from a superintendent that provides clear reassurance that student voice data will be used to support teachers' professional growth and learning — not for evaluation.
How will we ease teachers' anxieties about student voice data being used punitively against them?	• The National Equity Project's *Reviewing Data: Norms & Pitfalls* for thoughtful guidance on recognizing and redirecting common data analysis pitfalls.
How will we scaffold the process of reflecting on data so that teachers stay focused on what they can do to improve, rather than blaming themselves or others for disappointing results?	• Elevate community of practice meeting protocols, designed to help educators build an effective and trusting community of practice. In particular, see the building community and launch meeting protocols.

QUESTIONS TO CLARIFY THE ROLE OF STUDENT VOICE

If student voice data is seen as an extra thing, separate from other school priorities, it will not be used meaningfully, even by teachers who really care about their students' experiences. Answer the following questions to assess and refine your school's vision.

	Yes	Somewhat	No	Unsure	Reflections
Has our school or district leadership clearly articulated why we are focusing on student voice?					
Do the reasons for focusing on student voice align with our school and district strategic objectives?					
Have these reasons been communicated effectively with teachers and school staff?					
Did teachers have input into the strategic vision?					

RESOURCES AVAILABLE:

• The Elevate support article "Align Priorities for Coherence & Synergy" provides simple guidance and a short case study that illustrates these principles in action.

• *The Collective Vision* organizational condition guide from the University of Chicago explains why collective vision is important and how to establish it.

QUESTIONS TO ENSURE TIME AND RESOURCES FOR INCORPORATING STUDENT VOICE

Far too often, teachers are asked to do more without getting the time they need to do it well. If we want teachers to develop new ways to think and work, we need to give them time to do so. In our work with schools and organizations, we see multiple strategies for protecting time for reflection and planning in response to student voice data. Some schools set aside time for communities of practice to meet and discuss data. Others reserve coaching sessions to review data or devote professional learning days to engage with data. Consider the following questions as you work to ensure that teachers have the necessary time and resources to reflect and respond to student voice data.

When will student voice data be collected?	**RESOURCES AVAILABLE:** • The Elevate community of practice meeting protocols provide one model for bringing teachers together to review and reflect productively over multiple cycles of inquiry and action. • The Elevate learning condition guides provide a research-based vocabulary for student motivation and engagement. They are designed to help teachers interpret student voice results and identify evidence-based practices that could help them improve students' experiences and outcomes.
What process will be used to review and respond to student voice data?	
How will teachers be supported to make meaning of their student voice data?	

QUESTIONS TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN DATA ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION

Educators who are most successful at improving student experiences find ways to talk about their data and goals with their students. Students know more about their own experiences than anyone else and can help educators understand and respond to the data. They are also more willing to complete surveys thoughtfully when they understand how the data is being used.

How will you introduce students to the feedback process and help them understand the purpose of collecting student voice data?	**RESOURCES AVAILABLE:** • The Debriefing with Students Lesson Plan provides a protocol for engaging students in the process of interpreting their student voice data and identifying strategies that can be used to improve their experiences. • The Elevate support article "How can I debrief results with students?" features two teachers who describe how they use survey results as a starting point for deeper conversations with students.
When and how will you assure students that educators review their responses and take action in response?	
How will you engage students in the process of interpreting and acting on their feedback?	

MORE TOOLS ONLINE

For free tools on additional aspects of improvement described in this issue of *The Learning Professional*, see the list of resources on p. 25 or on our website at **learningforward.org/department/tools/**

UPDATES

CELEBRATE THE STANDARDS WITH US

April marks one year since Learning Forward released revised Standards for Professional Learning. Over the past year, thousands of educators have learned about standards through webinars, networks, and professional learning communities; used standards tools, publications, and Innovation Configuration maps; and shared with us how they are changing their practices as a result.

Learning Forward will dedicate April 24-28 to celebrating a year of leading and teaching with the revised standards. We will highlight resources that support implementation of high-quality professional learning and showcase a set of new tools. Visit **learningforward.org** for more details.

UPDATES

Meet the coaches for Learning Forward Academy Class of 2025

The Learning Forward Academy Class of 2025 is forming now and will kick off in July. Coaches for this cohort are Beth Brockman and Crystal Cooper.

Beth Brockman

Brockman has served Texas public schools as a middle and high school teacher, assistant principal, middle school principal, district leader for professional learning, and, most recently, assistant superintendent for employee services leading professional learning and human resources work. Her current work includes university teaching and collaboration with individuals and districts on human resources and leadership development.

Brockman has a long affiliation with Learning Forward. She graduated from the Learning Forward Academy in 2012, served on the conference host committee in 2014 and 2018, and served on the board of Learning Forward Texas. She has master's and doctorate degrees from the University of North Texas and a bachelor's degree from Baylor.

Crystal Cooper

Cooper is principal of Starling Elementary School in Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia and a consultant with the Center for Responsive Schools, where she provides social and emotional learning coaching and support to teachers. She has previously served as classroom teacher, literacy coach, Early Intervention Program teacher, and assistant principal.

Cooper graduated from the Learning Forward Academy in 2018 and served on the board of the Learning Forward Foundation. She has master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Georgia and a bachelor's degree from William Paterson University.

From left: Francine Whiteley, administrator of professional development; Elodia Ortega-Lampkin, district superintendent; and Carman Vargas, teacher on special assignment, from Woodland Joint Unified School District in California.

CALIFORNIA DISTRICT DEVELOPS AND IMPLEMENTS UNIFIED COACHING MODEL

To address its goal of building a strong instructional coaching program throughout the district, Woodland (California) Joint Unified School District partnered with Learning Forward to bring Coaches Academy to a group of 20 participants from the English learner, special education, and teaching and learning departments. The Coaches Academy was customized to build on the district's vision of instructional coaching and ensure it is shared by all teachers, staff, and administrators.

The building of that vision began with the coordinated efforts of Francine Whiteley, administrator of professional development, and Maria Medina, coordinator of English learner services, to create a unified plan for their respective teams, and it grew with the expansion of the plan across departments. The Coaches Academy will help the district with its goal of serving teachers across all school sites with job-embedded support, especially for teachers of students served by English learner and special education services.

To maximize implementation and foster sustainability, school site principals and district administrators will join the final Coaches Academy session to explore the unified coaching model and strengthen the administrator-coach relationships necessary for effective coaching.

ONLINE COURSE EXPLORES HOW TO IMPLEMENT A COACHING CYCLE

Learning Forward's online course offerings continue with Implementing a Coaching Cycle, which starts April 17. In this 15-hour, three-week course, expert coaches Heather Clifton and Andy Mendelsberg will unpack the coaching cycle as well as examine practice components of a planning conversation to set the stage for coaches' ongoing work with teachers.

Participants will:
- Illustrate and explain the components of the coaching cycle;
- Synthesize a variety of ways to structure coaching cycles and how to determine which structure is appropriate to use in a particular situation;
- Establish goals with a client for a coaching cycle;
- Examine key supports including demonstration, co-teaching, and observation with data gathering; and
- Identify key questions to ask during planning and reflection conversations.

Register at **learningforward.org/online-courses-2/**

Learning Forward represented during Public Schools Week

As part of Public Schools Week 2023, Betty Wilson-McSwain, president of Learning Forward Mississippi, participated as a panelist in a webinar titled The Language of Connection to Build Community Relationships.

In a discussion with Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, Wilson-McSwain highlighted the importance of leaning into data and articulating hope to craft stories of impact to help lawmakers understand what's needed to help students excel. Read a summary of the conversation at **learningforward.org/2023/03/03/advocacy-for-each-and-every-child/**

Also as part of Public Schools Week, Learning Forward CEO Frederick Brown shared his insight about why public schools are most successful when all educators are well-supported and engaged in ongoing professional learning. You can find his comments on our blog at **learningforward.org/2023/02/27/supporting-all-public-schools-educators/**

Public Schools Week is connected to a larger #HerefortheKids initiative encompassing the voices of parents, teachers, community and school leaders, and policymakers committed to equipping schools to meet the diverse needs of all learners and ensuring each and every child has access to excellent teaching. Learn more and find essential resources to support public schools at **www.publicschoolproud.org/about**

THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL WELCOMES NEW ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Jefna M. Cohen

Learning Forward welcomes Jefna M. Cohen to The Learning Professional team. As the new associate editor, Cohen will contribute to the journal and other Learning Forward publications and communications.

Cohen is a longtime educator with nearly 20 years of teaching in elementary school classrooms in Portland, Oregon. Her experience spans a variety of settings, including Title I, private, and public charter schools. Cohen is also a copywriter and longtime fiction creator.

Cohen has a master of education degree from Portland State University and a bachelor's degree from Lewis & Clark College.

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Follow us on social media. Share your insights and feedback about The Learning Professional by using **#TheLearningPro.**
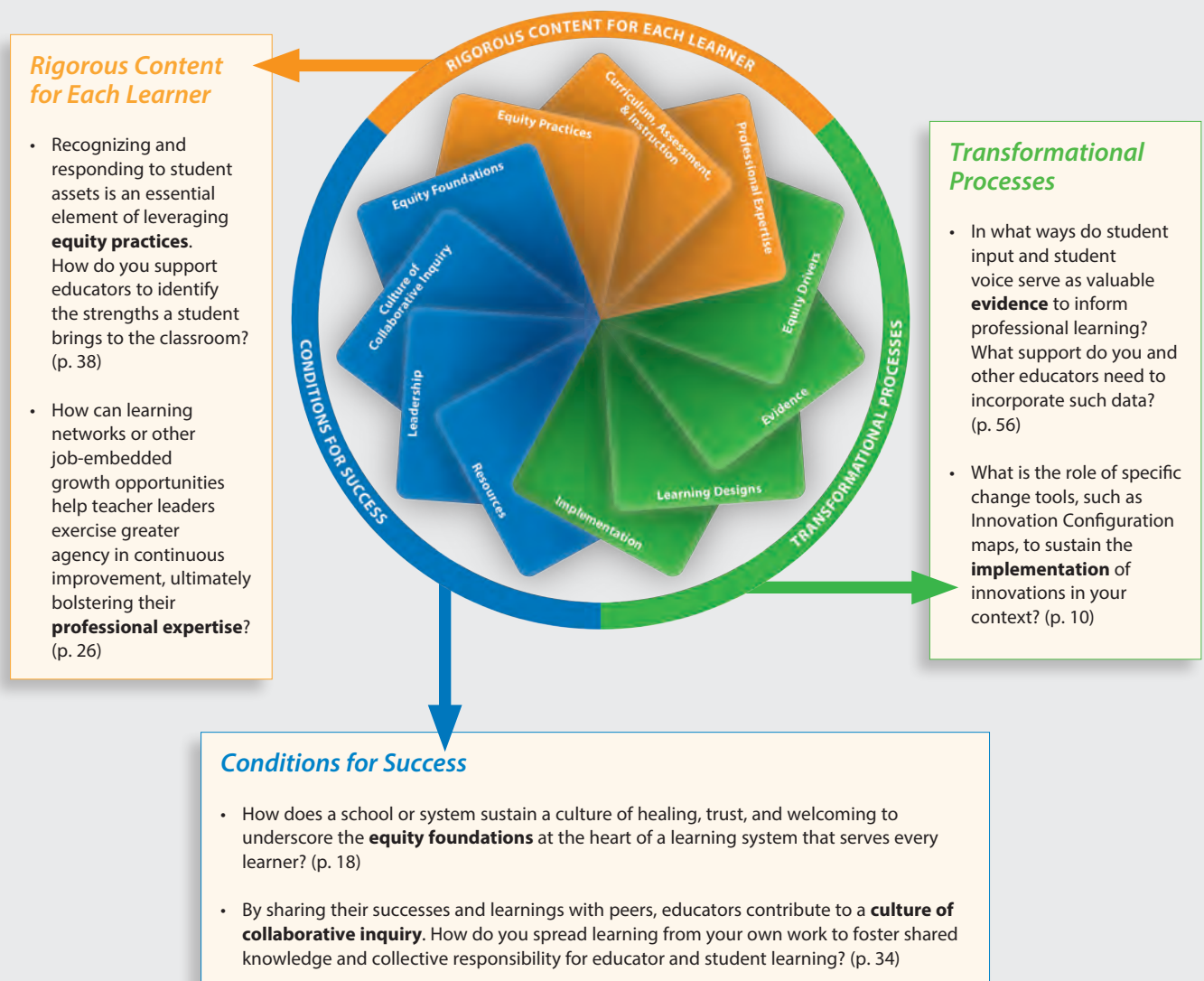
THROUGH THE LENS

OF LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Standards for Professional Learning describe the content, processes, and conditions of high-quality learning that makes a difference for students and educators. They are organized in a framework of three interconnected categories. Understanding each category and each standard can help learning leaders build systemic professional learning.

To help you deepen your understanding, this tool provides reflection questions that draw on articles from this issue of *The Learning Professional* and connect to standards from each category. You can use these questions to guide your reading of the articles or you can use them in conversations with colleagues — for example, during professional learning communities, observations, or planning discussions.

The page numbers after each question will take you to the article that corresponds to the question.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT STANDARDS TO FOSTER CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Rigorous Content for Each Learner

- Recognizing and responding to student assets is an essential element of leveraging **equity practices**. How do you support educators to identify the strengths a student brings to the classroom? (p. 38)

- How can learning networks or other job-embedded growth opportunities help teacher leaders exercise greater agency in continuous improvement, ultimately bolstering their **professional expertise**? (p. 26)

Transformational Processes

- In what ways do student input and student voice serve as valuable **evidence** to inform professional learning? What support do you and other educators need to incorporate such data? (p. 56)

- What is the role of specific change tools, such as Innovation Configuration maps, to sustain the **implementation** of innovations in your context? (p. 10)

Conditions for Success

- How does a school or system sustain a culture of healing, trust, and welcoming to underscore the **equity foundations** at the heart of a learning system that serves every learner? (p. 18)

- By sharing their successes and learnings with peers, educators contribute to a **culture of collaborative inquiry**. How do you spread learning from your own work to foster shared knowledge and collective responsibility for educator and student learning? (p. 34)

Learn more about Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning at
standards.learningforward.org

THE MODEL FOR IMPROVEMENT

The Model for Improvement, developed by Associates in Process Improvement, helps teams plan and test changes that lead to improvement.[1] It consists of the three fundamental questions (below, left) and the plan-do-study-act cycle (below, right).[2]

THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

AIM
What are we trying to accomplish?

MEASURES
How will we know that a change is an improvement?

CHANGES
What changes can we make that will result in improvement?

PLAN-DO-STUDY-ACT CYCLE
© 2012 Associates in Process Improvement

Teams determine what to do next (**act**). Do they adopt, adapt, abandon, or scale the change?

Teams **plan** to test a specific change and predict the result.

Teams **study** the data and assess whether their predictions were true.

Teams implement (**do**) the change and collect data on how it went.

ACT · PLAN · STUDY · DO

IMPROVEMENT IN PRACTICE

Who?

Lizzie Weiler is a teacher leader at Gunsaulus Scholastic Academy in Chicago, working with the Teach Plus Network for School Improvement. The network aim is to increase the on-track rate of 8th-grade students by **2%** per year.

SOURCES:
[1] bit.ly/2Ltpo0Z | [2] bit.ly/3J9GrlL

How?

SCHOOL TEAM'S AIM:
Improve student performance by fostering more engaged and supportive classroom relationships.

MEASURES:
Formative classroom assessments and PERTS Elevate student survey, administered quarterly.

CHANGE IDEA:
Organize students into small collaborative groups based on students' learning goals so they engage more deeply with content.

What next?

After trying collaborative groups, **10%** more students said they were engaging in "meaningful work." Weiler was encouraged about the group strategy.

When Weiler shared the survey results with her class, students thought their increased engagement might be due to content. They found the current unit's nonfiction content more relevant and engaging than the previous unit on fiction.

Weiler and her team are still testing and adapting the group strategy, but they are also considering new change ideas based on the students' hypothesis, including ways to make fiction units feel more relevant and meaningful.

District

Building

SUCCESS
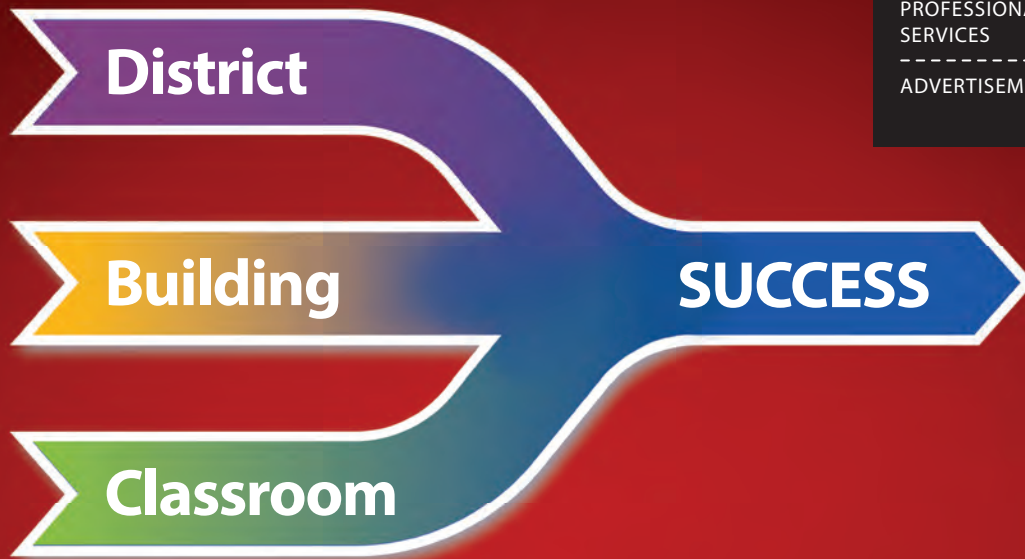
Classroom

PROFESSIONAL
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ADVERTISEMENT

It only works when every level is aligned

When the goals and efforts of your system, buildings, and classrooms are not aligned, you may see resistance to initiatives, silos, and pockets of excellence despite your best efforts for improvement. These issues ultimately mean one thing — inconsistent and inequitable results for both educators and students.

The experts at Learning Forward can help you develop a comprehensive professional learning plan that aligns goals and efforts at every level and puts you on a path to create a systemwide culture of learning. After more than 50 years of bringing together leaders in educator professional learning, we have helped thousands of schools and systems reach their goals.

For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, vice president, professional services, sharron.helmke@learningforward.org.

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